

# **KENKYO, KENJITSU O MOTTO NI IKITE ORIMASU**

*I Will Live with Humility and Dependability as My Motto*

**- Volume 4 -  
HIGH SCHOOL – SECOND YEAR**

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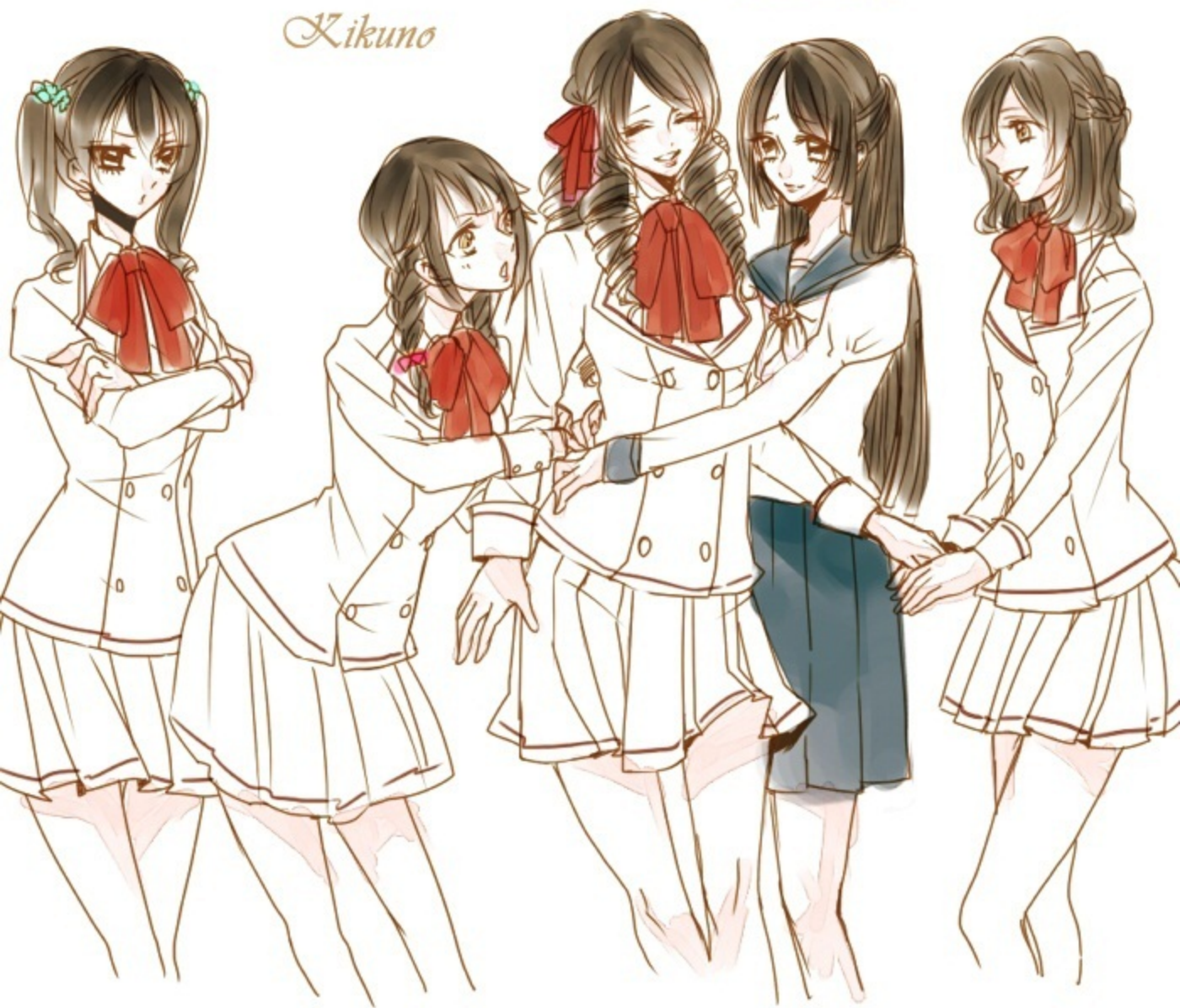
*Ririna*

*Reika*

*Sakurako*

*Serika*

*Xikuno*



*Reika and Her Happy Friends*

## CHAPTER 111

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Starting today I would be a 2nd year in Suiran's high school section. I wished for this every year, but I hoped I would end up with some girls I was close with~ I don't want to be alone...

And also, I hoped that all the troublesome people would end up in another class.

I stepped outside only to be buffeted by heavy winds. Maybe because it was spring. Since I was dainty and so delicate I looked like I was going to snap, maybe I would even be blown away by the wind~

It was going to mess up my hair though so I hurried into the car.

I pulled out a mirror to check myself. I couldn't give a bad impression to my new class, after all! I smiled into the mirror. My dimple was perfectly visible. Okay!

When I arrived there were already plenty of students crowded around the noticeboard. Some students were overjoyed, some were being consoled, the responses were all over the place.

I didn't have any guys I liked so most important to me was ending up with friends. I was the Chief of the Forever Alone village, but that was forever *romantically* alone. I fully intended to be surrounded by friends.

First I checked the list of girls in the same class as me. Shirasagi Ru'ne from my group was there! Hell yess!

Ru'ne-chan was one of the girls who I went to Karuizawa with, and was one of my closer friends in the group. Thank goodness. At the very least I managed to avoid a bitter year of isolation. Besides Ru'ne-chan were a few other girls from my clique as well. Phew.

As for the boys... Oh, Class Rep's name was there. Oohh, Class Rep! My first class with Class Rep in quite a while! One of my few male friends. This was a happy occurrence indeed.

Aside from him, the other boys were relatively harmless. All of the troublesome ones

were in a different class. Hell yesss!

I really *was* lucky this year. I had a bit of bad luck after receiving a cursed item but it looks like my fortunes were picking up again. The anthology in question had already been plastered with an anti-evil seal, wrapped in a cloth, and then sealed away in the same storage room as the dolls. Fight fire with fire and all that. Of course, if anybody ever wanted the anthology they were free to take it.

I looked at the other class lists and realised that of all things, Enjou and Wakaba-chan would be together. Worse yet, the 2nd-in-command of Tsuruhana's group was in that same class. This was bad... I decided to stay away.

"Reika-sama! We're in the same class!" said Ru'ne-chan as she ran to me with a smile.

We were overjoyed to be with each other. Some of the other girls came over and we chatted about the class allocations. I had great friends with me and no troublemakers. This was going to be a peaceful year.

Class Rep ended up as class rep again like natural. Since Nonose-san was in our class I had hoped that I would get out of it, but both my home room teacher and Class Rep had insisted on me. As for Nonose-san herself...

"I think you're the best suited, Reika-sama."

And that's how I ended up as the Vice Class Representative again. Honestly I had already half given in by now. It could be worse, I suppose. I had Class Rep as my partner, and there weren't any real troublemakers.

"Let's have another good year together, Kisshouin-san," smiled Class Rep. Oh yes, I hope so too.

Then, secretly, "And I'd like some advice with romance," he said. Advice on romance... Thinking about it, he had quite a long history with unrequited love as well, didn't he. Alright, leave it to me. I was going to make him a fine villager! First I'd have him read that anthology, maybe.

"Kisshouin-kun."

Huh? Kisshouin-kun?

Who was it? Who was it that added -kun to my name? —It was ‘Dite.

“Kisshouin-kun, may I ask you a question?”

‘Dite-kun, or Afrodite, was sporting his namesake as always. Maybe it was the hair but wow, did his face look big up close. And apparently people who were individualistic in their appearances also did the same with their speech. We were in the same class this year. I had ignored him though since I judged him harmless.

“Will the class be performing at this year’s class trip?”

“Performing? I cannot say. I have not heard anything of the like.”

“...I see. But when you require the services of my violin, you need only but speak. No need for hesitation. Even if the other students cannot reach my level of violin skills, I have no qualms with performing by myself. This is my opinion. What say you, Kisshouin-kun!”

Eh, huh...? In other words, Afrodite wanted to perform in front of us so badly that he came and asked about the excursion?

“...Well, I suppose I can not see the harm in it?”

Not that I even knew if there was going to be class performances in our itinerary last year.

“I thought as much! Truly, you were as reasonable a woman as I had judged! Kisshouin-kun, I anticipate a good year with you!”

“...Let us get along.”

Satisfied, ‘Dite-kun nodded and headed back to his seat, the Afro swaying in the air as he left.

“He was kind of incredible...” muttered Class Rep. ‘Dite-kun just completely ignored you. Is that okay?

“There are a lot of eccentric artists...” he continued, “Last year he wouldn’t stop playing the violin on the bus, so nobody got any sleep.”

Speaking of which, I remember hearing that from a girl in his class.

I retract my statement. We had the one troublemaker.

After school I headed to the Pivoine salon. Today's sweets were apple pies. I loved these.

The pie crust was crunchy, but the apple inside was soft and delicious.

It was so delicious, in fact, that I finished the whole thing in no time. I was still craving it...

While I fought an internal war against my appetite, somebody told me that somebody had come to visit me.

It turns out it was Mao-chan from the primary school.

It was unusual for her to come all the way here from the Petit Pivoine. Everyone here was older than her, which seemed to make her a little nervous.

"Is something the matter, Mao-chan? Come and sit down."

"Yes."

I led Mao-chan over to the sofa I had been sitting on.

"What will you be having? Ah! Today's food is apple pie. You must try some."

"Eh, but..."

I guess it was nerve wracking to be the only one eating. Geez.

"I shall have some as well. This way there should be no problems, correct?"

"Yes! Thank you very much, Reika-oneesama."

"You are very welcome."

The staff brought down apple pies in front of us so the two of us ate happily.

“It overjoys me that you come to visit, Mao-chan. Was there something you needed me for?”

“Ah, yes! Umm, I was having a birthday party on this day. I was hoping that you might want to come... If you can’t, then I understand.”

“A birthday party?”

“Yes. Haruto-niisama said he would be going as well, and I was hoping you would as well.”

“I see...”

A birthday party, huh...

I hadn’t actually checked my schedule yet, but Mao-chan of all people was inviting me. I could at least show up for a little.

“I understand. I shall check my plans and let you know.”

Mao-chan smiled happily. So cuute.

A present for a young girl... What should I get? I want to choose something that would build on my image as a wonderful onesama.

The two of us continued to chat harmoniously as we ate our delicious apple pies.



## CHAPTER 112

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Ririna was a high schooler now. Despite my apprehensions, she didn't go on a rampage like three years ago, and she didn't have problems making friends either. To my surprise she was actually doing pretty well for herself. She had rounded up the External Students and was ruling over her own clique now.

And since she wasn't just some External but my younger cousin, apparently even the Pivoine members in her grade couldn't make a move against her. Using my name like that while I had no idea. What a terrifying girl.

I had asked her friends before to tell me if she ever went crazy again, but things seemed to be fine for the moment.

Although, I did receive one report before that she had butted heads with some underclassman. Despite my worries though, it turned out just to be Bird-Brained Katsuragi so I ignored it.

Later, Ririna came up to me breathing excitedly.

"I wasted that idiot!" she boasted, like some kind of thug.

Kind as I was, I decided not to mention birds of a feather.

Anyhow, I hoped she wouldn't do anything to harm my reputation here.

In primary and middle school, the girls of my grade had only two major cliques; mine and Tsuruhana-san's. Ever since we entered high school though, all of the new Externals were leading to a new, third faction being born. It wasn't something you could afford to ignore.

Also Fellow Stalking horse was getting more and more popular amongst the girls. Even though we were both stalking horses, how come the guys were all avoiding me!? Wasn't this unfair? I want to be popular too!

Not that I couldn't understand the leader of the girls being frightening...

That's what I had concluded, when a few days later I saw Ririna in the cafeteria

surrounded by boys, giving me such a shock that I couldn't stop trembling.

Why was it just me...

Wondering if there wasn't at least one boy interested in me, my eyes darted around the crowd but every single boy I met eyes with looked away in fear.

Oh no... What if I was the Village Chief forever...

I had a ray of hope though. Mao-chan's party was coming up.

After she invited me I checked my schedule, only to find out I was free indeed. When I told her she was so happy she started clapping. How much cuter could she get!

And what was even better was that Ichinokura-san would be coming too. Ichinokura-san who had treated me delicately like I was a princess. A ray of light to sooth the discomfort of my heart!

I was going at the exercise stepper like crazy to maintain his image of the dainty, delicate ojousama.

It was making weird noises, actually. Was it because I hadn't used it for a while? Maybe it was too old?

Anyhow, I was exercising while watching informercials. Oohh... Some of these looked interesting...

Before I knew it, I was off the stepper and on the phone, ready to order.

Today was Mao-chan's birthday party so the moment my classes were finished I rushed to her house.

The party had already begun at the Sawarabi household, and Mao-chan was surrounded by classmates.

"Reika-oneesama! You came!"

"Happy Birthday, Mao-chan," I said as I held out my present.

It was pretty hard finding something for a little girl, but after a lot of searching I decided on a finely ornamented music box that looked like some sort of antique.

When you opened it up, a little prince and princess pair danced to ‘Someday My Prince Will Come’.

I had been really worried about whether she’d like it, but when she opened it up her eyes sparkled. Hahh, thank goodness.

“Isn’t that great, Mao-chan?”

“Yeah!”

Sitting next to Mao-chan was Yuuri-kun, the boy who rang the bell with her during the summer party.

It seems like Mao-chan didn’t need to wait for ‘someday’ since her prince was sitting beside her. Kuh-, so I lost here too...

Where was *my* prince candidate? I looked around but unfortunately he still hadn’t come due to work reasons. I had so carefully done my hair too...

Anyhow, apparently they had already done the cake cutting, because a waiter brought me a slice. I thanked him and then took a bit. It was delicious. Shockingly, Mao-chan’s mother had made not only this cake, but the rest of the food too. Normally people in the upper class left the cooking to full-time chefs or maids, or so I had thought.

I tried some of the other food next. All of it was just delicious. Not only did it taste like a professional’s, but somehow it had that touch of a mother’s home cooking, which just made it all the better.

The Sarawabi family was powerful enough to get Mao-chan into the Pivoine. There was no way that Mrs. Sarawabi couldn’t hire somebody else to do this. But her cooking skills were amazing regardless!

I was shooting the food a look of respect when Mao-chan’s mum, Inokura-san’s older sister, smiled at me and said,

“Cooking is my hobby.”

Her hobby, huh. How nice. I wasn't very good at it. Well, not that I was terrible either.

In the future, if the Kisshouin family ever collapsed, the chores would probably all fall to me. I doubted Okaasama could cook. I'd never even seen her stand in the kitchen before. In that case, I had no choice but to do my best.

I wish Mao-chan's mum would take me as a student.

My first act as a prospective disciple was to sample all of the master's cooking.

At first the primary schoolers had kept their distance because they didn't know me, but after seeing me happily chatting and eating with Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun they gradually warmed up to me. They started calling me Oneesama too. They were all so cute!

They all listened enthusiastically as I told them stories of my time in primary school. When I told them about how you could become a hero by winning Suiran's cavalry battles, with glittering eyes one boy said,

"My Oniichan said the same thing! There's a legendary man called the Emperor! Both me and Oniichan are aiming to be just like him!"

Uwa...

The children brought food to me, telling me how this or that was delicious, so I thanked them and tried it all.

The spinach quiche was yummy.



So was the meat pie.



Mmm, and the seafood paella.



Mao-chan and all the other cute little kids kept bringing me yummy dishes. Aahh~ I'm so glad I camee~



I was chewing on some bruschetta when Ichinokura-san came here from work.



“Haruto-niisama! You’re late!” complained Mao-chan, but she hugged him all the same.

“Sorry, sorry,” he apologised, handing her his gift.

“Haruto-niisama!” she said as she held the gift. “Reika-oneesama came too!”

“Reika-san?”

He discovered me surrounded by children.

“So you’re here too, Reika-san. Thanks for coming.”

“I am grateful to have been invited. I truly had a good time today.”

I gently dabbed away the tomato sauce on my lips and gave him a smile.

“Mao here kept telling everyone about how she hoped you would come, Reika-san.”

“I am honoured.”

Mao-chan’s mum came over with a plate of food.

“Haruto, you must be hungry after work,” she said, handing him the plate.

“Mind if I sit next to you?” he asked me. “Have you eaten too, Reika-san? Neesan’s cooking is pretty good, you know?”

“Yes, I had some. Your oneesama is truly a splendid cook.”

“You don’t seem to be eating all that much though...”

All I had in front of me was the bruschetta. After all, I had already cleaned everything else up.

“I ate more earlier.”

“Really?”

Speaking of which, I was supposed to be one of those girls without much appetite,

wasn't I. I was thinking of furthering that impression when an unexpected curveball was thrown at me.

"Reika-oneesan really ate a lot just now, didn't she!" one of the children innocently exclaimed.

Maybe they had meant to support me since Ichinokura-san was doubting my words. They started talking about how I ate this dish, and that dish, one after another.

Ichinokura-san seemed dumbfounded.

I wanted to dig a hole and bury myself... Embarrasssingggg!\* The small eater character transformed into a mega glutton!

"...I see. So you've eaten quite a bit, Reika-san."

"...Yes."

I wanted to run.

Thinking about it, I may have eaten more just now than any normal girl would. And at somebody else's house too.

After thinking for a moment, Ichinokura-san smiled brightly.

"Then shall we go somewhere to eat together? I like people who can eat."

"Eh!"

The Heavens had not forsaken me!!

Thank god I was a such a glutton!

A few days after the party, when I went to the Petite Pivoine to hand over the photos, an angel of a boy greeted me.

## CHAPTER 113

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When the door to the Petite Pivoine opened, I saw an angel glowing in the light.

In front of me smiled a little white-skinned, amber-haired angel. S-, So cuuuuuuuute!

This world actually had children as cute as this!? Was he even really human? He wasn't some kind of finely crafted android, or a real angel or something!?

"Hello, high school oneesan. Did you need something?"

The little angel spoke with a voice like a bell. Even his voice was so lovely!

And his expression as he tilted his head in confusion! I wanted to show him to my doll-loving Okaasama! Would it be okay if I took him home...?

"Oneesan?"

The little angel looked a little troubled now.

Oh! Oh no! Did the adorable angel think I was some suspicious person!? Did I seem like some kind of dangerous deviant because I kept staring silently at him? No! You're wrong! I just wanted to admire your beauty, little angel! I'm just a harmless Rococo!

"Ah, my apologies. It seems I was lost in thought for a moment. I have come here looking for Sawarabi Mao-san. My name is Kisshouin Reika, a 2nd year Pivoine member of the high school section."

Angel-chan accepted my words with a smile and nod, before taking my hand and welcoming me in.

His little hand was *soooooo* sooooooooooft! It was like marshmallows! Ukuuuu! Seriously, can I take him home!?

Upon entering the room, Mao-chan immediately noticed me and greeted me with a huge smile.

"Reika-oneesama!"

“Mao-chan.”

She rushed up to me and then glued herself to my other arm.

“Thank you for coming the other day, Reika-oneesama! I was really happy! I really like the music box. I listen to it every day.”

“Goodness, I should thank you for inviting me. I had a wonderful time. And I am very glad that you liked the music box.”

While the two of us were talking, Angel-chan let go of my hand and headed further in. Aahh! Angel-chan! Wait!

“Reika-oneesama?”

“Sorry, it was nothing.”

I had wanted to touch his fluffy hair...

“Did you come to see me today? Ah! Reika-oneesama, please sit.”

Yuuri-kun was already sitting on the sofa she brought me to, and the two of them seemed to be in the middle of having tea and cake.

“Ah, hello Reika... oneesan...”

For whatever reason, Yuuri-kun was embarrassed to call me ‘oneesan’, and would always get all shy right after. How cute. Life was great again.

“Hello there. Today I came to give you the photos I took during Mao-chan’s birthday party.”

I handed Mao-chan a photo album with “Happy Birthday!” written on the front.

“Wahh!”

“There are many photos of you two together.”

“Oh! It’s true.”

“Mao, lemme see too.”

The two of them began browsing the photos. Originally I had considered a fancier one like a photo shoot, but that plan involved asking Umewaka-kun for help, and talking about photos with him was opening a can of worms. I had exchanged email addresses with the Dog Lover in a moment of carelessness, and now I got regular photos of Beatan sent to me like I was subscribed to some magazine.

I tried to give him a hint and replied,

“It has been cold recently. Might Beatrice have gotten a cold?”

only for him to reply that night,

“It’s Beatrice. I sleep next to Aa-tan every night so I’m fine. I wear fluffy warm pajamas too.”

Mail from a dog... Or rather, mail from a *high school boy* happily *pretending* to be a dog... Oh my god...

Oh, incidentally Dog Lover-kun’s first name was Asuka, apparently. Asuka, hence Aa-tan. He was using that to refer to himself? Aa-tan?

Honestly, I was starting to just wish they would get married already. In ancient Japan it was traditional to sneak into your lover’s bed, but this brought a whole new meaning to that.

While I was lamenting over my friend’s future, Angel-chan came over, carefully holding onto for dear life a tray of tea and cake.

Aahh, Angel-chan! You’re so cute when you’re giving your all!

“Here, Oneesan.”

“Eh!?”

This was for me!? That’s why he let go of my hand to leave!? To prepare *this* for me!? Aahh! What a good kid! Angel-chan!



The cake was a Crémét d'Anjou. Of course Angel-chan brought me a cake made by the angels!



*In Japan, Crémét d'Anjou is something akin to a fluffier cheesecake served with a raspberry coulis (usually as the centre).*

“Thank you. It must have been difficult bringing this all the way here by yourself.”

“No, something like that was easy.”

But yours palms are still red from holding onto the tray, you know?

“Please eat,” smiled the little angel. Haaah~ *Cute!* Angel-chan, how would you like to become a child of the Kisshouin house?

“You brought Reika-oneesama her tea? Thanks, Yukino-kun.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Yukino-kun? So your name is Yukino-kun?” I asked.

Yukino(field of snow). A perfect name for the pure white Angel-chan!

“Yes. My name is Enjou Yukino. I’m very pleased to meet you, Reika-oneesan.”

Yukino-kun the angel smiled adorably at me. ...Hm?

...

...

...

...Enjou?

“Ummm... Yukino-kun? Could it be that you have some relation to Enjou Shuusuke-sama?” I asked in dread.

Please say you don’t know him. At least say that you’re just distantly related. Please, anything but *that*.

“Enjou Shuusuke is my older brother.”

*GEHHHHHHH!*

Enjou’s little brother!? Why? He’s not like him at all! How could that scheming devil possibly have a little brother like this pure little angel!

I supposed their *faces* looked a little similar. Their hair colour was different though. Actually, wasn’t his hair colour kind of like the Enjou from Kimidol? That was honey-coloured, but his was amber. Oh. Could it be that not only the hair colour, but the kind heart that manga!Enjou had were both inherited by his little brother?

I was so hoping to avoid this cliché though...

“Ummm... Is there some problem with my brother?”

Maybe the frown showed on my face. Yukino-kun was looking at me with an anxious expression, so I quickly put on a smile.

“Oh no. I was simply surprised as I happen to be in the same year as him. I had no idea Enjou-sama had such a lovely younger brother.”

“Is that really all?”

Oh no! Please don’t make that worried expression.

“Yes. Why, your brother and I occasionally chat in the Pivoine salon. Oh! And just recently I received some souvenirs from him!”

“Souvenirs from Niisama?”

“Yes, allegedly he travelled to some famous waterfalls and forests. They were delicious.”

“I see.”

Finally, Yukino-kun was back to smiling.

“Um, may I sit next to you too?”

“Of course!”

Yukino-kun sat meekly down by my side and gave a little smile. An angel...

Of course, I knew intellectually that I should have kept my distance, given the identity of his older brother, but I just couldn't resist this angel's smile!

I took a bite of the white angel cake that Angel-chan had brought for me. It was fluffy, and melted in my mouth!

“Simply delicious. Thank you, Yukino-kun.”

“Yes!”

Yukino-kun smiled happily at my thanks.

Apparently he had just entered 1st grade in the primary school section this year. He really did seem unused to this, come to think of it. And he was tiny too.

Yukino-kun gallantly offered to refill my tea. So cute! I'd never even seen his older brother pour tea for anyone, you know?

“Reika-oneesama, I want to talk to you too,” said Mao-chan as she pulled on my arm, sulking just a little.

One arm with Yukino-kun, and the other with Mao-chan. Was this paradise!?

“Sorry, Mao-chan.”

“It's fine. Say, Reika-oneesama, you're going to go eat with Haruto-niisama, right?”

“Yes, I am. We scheduled something like that the other day.”

“Haruto-niisama knows lots of good places to eat. You can look forward to it!”

I see. I think I will.

After being soothed by the children, and having my fill of the cake, I left the Petite Pivoine.

Mao-chan, Yuuri-kun, and Yukino-kun saw me off at the door.

They were all so adorable.

When I got home, I received a mail from Ichinokura-san to confirm our schedule.

I was so looking forward to this! Ah, but was it okay just to be the glutton girl? Was it better to double down and continue pretending to be a small eater...?

Which was the right choice as a maiden?

## CHAPTER 114

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Not long after I met Yukino-kun, the word was spreading that Enjou's younger brother had entered the Suiran primary school section.

According to the rumours the boy was as good-looking as his older brother. Hordes of girls went to the primary school section to see him, and when they came back they said he was adorable, which just fed back into the problem.

But Enjou responded to it. With an unusually stern expression, he said,

"My brother has a weak body, so could you please not cause such a fuss?"

Thanks to that, the building rampage dissipated into nothing.

Yukino-kun even came up as a topic in the salon, but I guess even Enjou couldn't treat the Pivoine members that way.

"We had no idea that you had a younger brother, Enjou-sama. You should bring him here to visit," said the President.

"Sure. Should we get the chance."

"Apparently many girls have already gone their way into the primary school section to see him. They say he looks just like his older brother and is terribly cute."

"He is cute, but my little brother has always been ill with asthma, so I'm worried that he'll have an attack if people cause too much of an uproar. I want him to have a nice, peaceful time here."

"Goodness! Why that *is* terrible. Then we will ask the Petite Pivoine to cooperate in helping Yukino-kun enjoy a peaceful school life. It wouldn't do to have fools loitering around him."

"Please."

Enjou smiled, causing the girls gathered around Kaburagi and him to turn red.



And so, with the President of the Pivoine as an ally, Enjou solidified his protection.

So Yukino-kun had a weak constitution... I suppose he was a bit pale.

But huh. That schemer cared so much about his younger brother. Didn't expect this side to him.

I was drinking milk tea when I met eyes with the devil in question. Urgh.

"Kisshouin-san, I heard you met my brother?"

"Eh..."

I could feel a cold sweat forming. Could it be that the one who started all this was me?! Oh dear...

"Ah, yes, I happened to meet him when I visited the Petite Pivoine. I was there to hand something to a girl there. The one who opened the door happened to be your younger brother. Truly, what a coincidence," I said, making doubly sure to emphasise that it was a coincidence.

Stop it! I'm not your enemy!

"Mm, my brother told me. Thank you for keeping him company."

"No need..."

Was he really thanking me? Unlike Yukino-kun, there was no trusting this guy.

"Kisshouin, you met Yukino?" interrupted Kaburagi.

So he knew him too. Well, it made sense considering he was best friends with Enjou.

"Yes, well."

"Hmmmmmm..."

"...Um, he is a very sweet and kind boy, is he not?"

"Hmmmmmm..."

For some reason Kaburagi frowned.

Enjou was still wearing that unreadable smile as he thanked me.

I was getting a bad feeling so I hastily retreated from the salon.

Right now I had a bigger problem than the incident with Yukino-kun. The 1st years were deciding which clubs to join. Honestly speaking, the Handicrafts Club was kind of a plain one. All the members were the quiet types, and there weren't many of them either. That's why I had to pull my weight to get new members!

Ever since becoming an official member, I had pretty much come every day they were open. It made sense. I was an official member, after all.

Today was no exception, as I hurried to the clubroom. My bag was filled with snacks that I had just stolen from the Pivoine salon, which I was going to use to entertain prospective members. How's that for being a hostess!

Generally it was forbidden to bring snacks to Suiran so this would probably give us quite the advantage. Hu hu hu...

While I was making the club great again, some new students came to look. I shot up. Fresh meat!

For a split second they seemed startled.

Oh? How come? Were they nervous? Ohh! I know! That's what the snacks were for!

With a smile, I beckoned the younglings over to a seat.

"Come in, sit down. We have sweets, you know?"

"Eh-"

"How about some tea? We have some good blends."

Blends that I also stole from the salon.

Despite the tea and sweets in front of them, the newcomers seemed to shrink in on themselves. What was stopping them from just relaxing and having a chat about club activities? Being the gentle senpai that I was, I gave them a heartfelt smile to help them relax. Smile smile. Hmm? Why did they keep shooting glances at the door? They had only just come.

“Feel free to take your time. Now come, eat up.”

“Umm... But, eating outside the dining hall is... And bringing sweets is against the rules as well...”

“My! There is no problem, *I guarantee*. After all, these were taken from the Pivoine salon.”

The colour drained from their faces. Was that one girl over there trembling?

“Ummm...”

Before I could say another word, the newcomers shot up and made a break for the door as they repeated apology after apology.

“...”

...Could it be that ...I was the reason? But how come? I was so friendly and everything. Far from eating the snacks I prepared, they didn't even take them with them...

Some more girls appeared after that, but they all had the same reaction. Even though they were supposed to be having a look, they all left the moment they arrived. And not only did they not eat the snacks, they didn't even touch the tea. The worst one was when the girl shut the door the moment she opened it and ran. What the heck!

I got a little annoyed after a while and wouldn't let the next one leave without eating the snacks, but the girl turned blue and muttered,

“If I eat this I'll...”

You'll what? This isn't food from Hades, you know. Now come. Eat. Eaaaat.

With teary eyes, the girl nibbled on a madeleine.

...She just swallowed, didn't she? She would never escape now.

One new member, confirmed. It was time to take her signature.

After a while, the Club President moved me as far as possible into the clubroom.

Ehh~? But I want to contribute as an official member of the club. I'll serve tea or whatever you need.

Then, the Club President ordered a line of club members to sit in front of me like a wall, blocking me from view.

But would we even get members now? I was worried. Maybe I really should... Ah, I can't see. C-, Could you move?

Today I was going to eat with Ichinokura-san.

He asked me how I felt about Japanese food, so I OK'd it. Where was he going to take me though? One of those fancy, traditional kaiseki places? Instead he took me to a kamameshi place.



*Ingredients and rice are cooked together in a pot which they are served in. Kind of like a slant-eyed paella. Mentally associated with what people were eating after the disastrous 1923 Kantou Earthquake. This is a picture of a fancier snow crab one.*

When you came down to it, kamameshi wasn't something you would associate with the image of haute cuisine, so I was genuinely surprised. I loved eating this in my last life though. Actually I just love rice in general. Viva el arroz!

“Maybe this is a little plain for you. If you’re not okay with this place, I was going to take you to a great Italian restaurant instead.”

“No, this place is perfect.”

Kamameshi~ Kamameshi~ Apparently by choosing this kamameshi place instead of some fancy French restaurant Ichinokura-san’s opinion of me shot up.

Actually, this place was at least fancy enough to have private rooms, so it wasn’t like we were slumming it up.

“This place does amazing kamameshi. I really wanted you to try it, Reika-san. My sister told me that you seemed to enjoy her paella, so I thought you might like this too.”

“My.”

Exactly right!

There were so many different kamameshi dishes on the menu that I just couldn’t choose.

The red salmon and ikura one look *sooo* good~



*Red salmon and ikura(salted salmon roe).*

And the chicken one was such a close competitor.



*Chicken kamameshi.*

The prawns were tempting too.



But you couldn't go wrong with the classics like five-item gomoku...



*Gomoku kamameshi.*

“I think I’ll be ordering the red salmon and ikura set. What about you, Reika-san?”

“Then I shall go with the gomoku set.”

It was a difficult decision. I didn’t regret it though. I loved quail eggs. But still, that red salmon...

When they brought us our food, besides the kamameshi, the set meal came with chawanmushi, deep-fried tofu, pickles, and a clear soup broth too. I loved chawanmushi! And it had ginkgo inside!

And the broth in the kamameshi was amazing! Choosing this place was the right choice! Hm, I think I’d leave the quail egg for last.

“Reika-san. If you’d like, shall we come here again?”

Holy hell! What a wonderful idea, Ichinokura-san!

I carefully moved my quail egg to my chawanmushi, and then exchanged kamameshi. Red salmon was great!

When I realised it, I had been speaking passionately with Ichinokura-san about the kamameshi and chawanmushi, and he was telling me about his favourite foods too. Apparently he preferred taste over form. I totally get you, Ichinokura-san. I could really get onboard with his preferences.

We spent our time chatting happily about food, and began ordering one thing after another on the menu. The two of us finished it all. The matcha green tea ice cream for dessert was delicious too. Apparently they made it in this restaurant. How splendid.

When it was time to go, we made a firm promise to do this again sometime.

It seems like I had met someone I could show all of the real me to.



## CHAPTER 115

---

Apparently we were slowly gaining new members. I say ‘apparently’ because I wasn’t there to see it myself. Actually I wasn’t allowed to interact with them directly.

According to Club Pres, my title as a Pivoine member was scaring away some of the newer students, so she hoped that I would make myself scarce just for the duration of the recruitment period.

I couldn’t really fault that logic. Everyone who joined that club was the same timid and quiet type, so I could see how they might be afraid of us. In Suiran, the Pivoine were like the ultimate predators, after all. The one group that you shouldn’t ever offend.

I knew that feeling too. But I was an *official* member of the Handicrafts Club. Wasn’t there any way I could help!?

Anyhow, I was sitting in a corner and needle-felting, sparing the occasional glance at the visiting students, when one of them called out to me falteringly. Heck yes!

“Did you have a question?”

“Yes. I was hoping somebody could tell me about the sewing machine that this club uses, but...”

Sewing machine?

I wasn’t proud of this, but I had never used it before. Actually I sucked at them in general. Things just got out of hand, and then the threads started to get tangled and... Anyhow, it was just hard. Come to think of it, when I was younger the threads got tangled and the sewing machine stopped moving. So I tried yanking it out, but the struggle ended with the machine giving off smoke. Machinery was difficult to use, wasn’t it.

But it was a chance to help. I decided to try my best!

“What did you want to know about it?”

“I wanted to know which company made the overlock sewing machines. Also whether

or not you had any 4-thread overlocks.”

...What on earth was an overlock machine. And what was this about 4-threads?

“I’ve only ever used a 3-thread. I was hoping to get the chance to try my hand at a 4-thread.”

???

Oh no. I was trying my best but it was all Greek to me...

But I was an official club member. I couldn’t let her know.

“...Please wait a moment. I am a little tied up at the moment, so I will find somebody to answer your questions. You wanted to know about overlock sewing machines, yes?”

Anybody! Isn’t there anybody who knows about these “overlocked machines”!?

While I was looking for somebody who could answer, another one of the visitors came up to that girl and said,

“That miss over there is a member of the Pivoine, you know! You can’t just send her on chores like that, what if you make them angry!?”

I returned with a girl who knew more about the topic but Overlock-chan said,

“I’m so sorry! I’m an External Student and only joined this year, so I really had no idea!”

earnestly apologising to me.

It wasn’t a problem at all, though... I was just pretending to be busy so I didn’t have to explain. So seriously, please don’t look so scared of me~ I’m part of the commoner-faction, you know?

Maybe I should learn more about sewing machines...

Around that time, Ririna showed up with her buddies in tow.

“Geez, Reika-san! What a boring club you’ve joined!”

That stupid girl!

Flames of rage were beginning to grow in my heart but she had a *lot* of followers. If she joined the club, wouldn't we get a whole wave of members!?

"Goodness, welcome, Ririna-san. Did you have some interest in handicrafts?" I asked as graciously as possible but...

"As if! Like I'd ever join such a minor club. I just came to make fun of you!"

Since that was the case, I immediately kicked her out.

Unfortunately some of the other club prospectives happened to see it all, and they ran away in fear. Curse you, Ririnaaaa!

Club President put her hand on my back, and gently returned me to my corner. This time a bunch of mannequin torsos were set in front of me like a wall.

It was a little lonely here...

Class Rep was looking gloomy. When I asked him what was wrong, it turned out that Miharuchan was getting along with a boy in her class.

"We're in different classes too. Looks like I'm at a major disadvantage, huh? What do I do. Do you think Honda-san really likes him?"

"Hmmm."

I wasn't all that close with her or anything, but maybe I would have a chance to ask her. Class Rep looked desolate.

Thinking about it, wasn't Nonose-san friendly with Miharuchan? I saw them having lunch together quite a lot.

"Shall I find out for you?"

"Eh!? You would do that!? Thank you, Kisshouin-san!"

The maiden beamed with surprised joy. I didn't mind doing this but what was he going to do if she really did like somebody?

The next day I greeted Nonose-san in the morning, and used that as an exchange to engage in some small talk. Obviously I couldn't just walk up and demand she explain Miharu-chan's relationship with him.

"I still owe you for taking care of me during the summer camp in middle school. Thank you for supporting me, especially while I was struggling with leading. I have ended up as a class representative again, but I hope for your continued support."

"Of course! I don't know how I can help but if I can then I will. Wow though. Summer camp. That's nostalgic."

We had fun chatting about it for a while.

"Come to think of it, Miharu-san attends every year, but she was strangely absent the one year I attended."

"Oh, now that you mention it she did miss out. I remember mailing her while I was there."

"Oh my. What did you say?"

"Ummm... I've forgotten. Probably something about the fireworks."

"I see. It would have been nice to be in the same class together."

"Yes. We thought it was a shame too."

"I see. Had Miharu-san been in our class, she would certainly have been the class representative instead. And she gets along with Class Rep."

"You think...? I think Class Rep makes a better pair with you, Reika-sama. What do you think of him?"

"Class Rep? I suppose I find him earnest and diligent?"

"I thought so~! Reika-sama, you're close with Iwamuro-kun from the Judo Club too, aren't you? What do you think about him?"

“Iwamuro-kun, you ask? Why, I think he is a man who knows what he wants, and is willing to put in the effort as well.”

Ever since I gave him that facial mask, apparently he never stopped maintaining his skin. Thanks to that, he could boast the most flawless skin in the Judo Club.

“I see~”

I didn’t know why, but Nonose-san was nodding in enjoyment. Who cares about me, we’re supposed to talk about Miharu-chan.

“Speaking of boys, is Miharu-san close with any in her new class?”

“Boys? Hmmm, I can’t say I’ve heard her say anything like that. Oh my, Reika-sama, you’re actually interested in these kinds of gossip?”

“Eh-, I, well...”

“I’d love to hear more about your romances~ Ah, but I suppose I shouldn’t ask, right?”

She looked a little disappointed. Uh, no, I actually don’t have any wonderful stories to tell.

“Every love rumour we hear about you is romantic. I’m envious.”

“Huh? Love rumour?”

“Like the love poem anthology. The story had me spellbound. The chamberlain and mercenary just weren’t the best choice. Reika-sama, I’ll support you!”

“Eh? Chamberlain? Mercenary?”

I had no idea what she was talking about but the bell rang so our conversation was cut short.

What on earth was that...?

But she mentioned something I couldn’t ignore. Love poem anthology. Don’t tell me she was talking about Kaburagi!? What on earth was romantic about *that*!? It was a cursed item, damnit!

Class Rep glanced my way during class, but sorry. I didn't get anything out of it.

Dite came and pressed me about the performance for our class trip.

Sorry, I forgot.

He handed me a CD and asked me to choose one of the tracks on it. Apparently he had recorded his violin performances.

Did I really have to listen to this...?

## CHAPTER 116

---

Not only did I have another food outing with Ichinokura-san, we were going to bring Mao-chan this time.

He spoke about her last time. Apparently she was about to become an older sister.

Her grandparents and relatives were all ecstatic about a Sawarabi heir being born. So ecstatic that they kept saying careless things in front of her like,

“We finally have a boy!”

or

“I didn’t know what we would do if it was a girl again.”

Not that they meant to hurt her, but they did all the same.

Since all anyone was talking about was her brother, Mao-chan was in a sulking mood.

Both Ichinokura-san and her parents were quite worried for her.

I guess that was why Mao-chan’s mum made all of the food for her birthday. Even for a hobby that had been an incredible amount of effort. I guess that was her way of telling her daughter that she treasured her. Mao-chan seemed really happy to eat her mum’s food too.

Life was pretty harsh for an eight-year-old though... I hadn’t noticed at all.

In my old life I had a younger sister but no brothers. In this life I had Oniisama. Not once had I ever been told that they wished I hadn’t been born a girl though. If it happened now I would only feel annoyed, but it must have been a shock to somebody Mao-chan’s age.

Ichinokura-san told me that he wanted to prioritise her to make up for all of the relatives who put her younger brother first.

“Mao really idolises you, Reika-san. That night after the summer party where she met

you she told us all about how she met a wonderful onesama. You took photos of her and Yuuri-kun and gave her the framed photo as a present, didn't you? Mao was overjoyed.

"You started to pop up in her conversations. She told me about how well you treated her. I think she was just happy that somebody was willing to pay attention to her instead of her brother.

"I'm sorry if this seems shameless, but as the onesama she adores, I hope you can spare her just a little attention. I don't want her to be lonely... Please."

Ichinokura-san lowered his head to me.

I accepted without thought. Mao-chan was adorable and I loved her, so I would have done it anyhow. The bow was actually making me uncomfortable. I wasn't spending time with Mao as some favour to him. I was doing it because I wanted to. Actually, wasn't Ichinokura-san underestimating Mao-chan's cuteness?

When I told him as much he broke into a wide grin.

We segued into scheduling the dinner with Mao-chan instead, and promised to contact each other once we had a better idea of when we were all free. Later I heard from him that Mao-chan had been ecstatic at the idea. Apparently it took him quite a lot of effort to calm her down from trying to go right that minute.

Dinner with Mao-chan and Ichinokura-san... I was really looking forward to it.

There was going to be no student performance during the 2nd year class trip. I relayed the information to Dite who visibly deflated. Why didn't this guy go to a music school, anyway...

We were going to be staying at Nikkou City, in Tochigi.





*Nikkou city in Tochigi. Its mountains, forests and hot springs make it a popular tourist destination. Despite being only an hour or two away from Tokyo, its height above sea level makes it rather cold.*

Since we were high schoolers and all, I was wondering why they chose somewhere so close. As it turns out, they also had a popular hiking course. Considering we were supposed to be a school for pampered rich kids we sure did go through some really athletic excursions. According to the rumours this hike was going to be way tougher than last year's so I was honestly kind of worried.

My other worry was that Kegon Falls was also in Nikkou, so would Kaburagi really be okay? It hadn't even been a year since I got that shortbread from Enjou.

I just hoped that this trip wouldn't reopen his wounds. I could expect a lot of trouble if it did.

We gathered early in the morning on the day of the trip. Sleepy...

In consideration of the hiking course, I drank one of the slightly more expensive energy drinks before I left the house. I could only hope that it would work.

When we began, I made sure to take small steps, but it was as bad as I had imagined. It felt like I had been walking forever.

Fuyuko-sama and the others had given up early on. Uuu, I wanted to as well. But how could I as a class rep! I was at the end of the line though, so it's not like I was actually helping though! I didn't expect I would be much use by the end of this, so I asked Nonose-san to organise our class once we reached the goal.

“Just take it easy, okay?” Ru’ne-chan encouraged me, as I lagged slowly behind the majority.

Looking around, it was the same group as always.

When we finally reached the goal, everyone was, as usual, already having lunch. Shouldn’t they have waited for us to show class spirit or something? I was feeling a little resentful as usual.

Exhausted, by the time I had begun with my own obentou some of the other students were already done. Wakaba-chan was amongst them.

She was strolling around the place, looking at flowers here and there. It was nice that she had energy.

Suddenly, Enjou came and talked to her. Eh!?

I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I saw her smile and nod along with him. When did they get so close!? And Kaburagi was noticeably absent.

Since I was looking their way, some of the girls around me noticed as well.

“Who’s that girl speaking with Enjou-sama?”

“That scholarship student, Takamichi-san, I think. Remember? The one always on the ranking board?”

“Why is she being so intimate with Enjou-sama!?”

Oh dear. I caused a minor uproar. Before I could try to distract them, Wakaba-chan and Enjou split up. ...Thank goodness.

This time it was somebody who approached Enjou. The No. 2 in Tsuruhana-san’s group sidled up to him first, which was the cue for a lot of other girls to copy her. No. 2 was glaring at Wakaba-chan’s back from afar.

In the afternoon we got on the coach and headed to Kegon Falls.



*Kegon Falls is a scenic and popular tourist destination, located in a national park in Nikkou.*

Naturally, considering how famous it was.

So this was the waterfall that Kaburagi visited in the winter... The temperature had gone a bit further than 'refreshing' into 'cold'. I wasn't surprised that Kaburagi caught a cold coming here in the dead of winter.

I found myself looking for Kaburagi in the crowd. He was staring into the water at the base of the waterfall. Ah... Did his wounds reopen?

Enjou was glued to his side, holding his arm. Mn, he was a good friend...

When it was time to leave, Kaburagi didn't seem to respond. He must have been thinking about something. Scary.

In the end Enjou had to pull him away. I wonder if Enjou had to do the same thing back during Kaburagi's journey...

When we returned to the bus, Wakaba-chan showed Enjou a souvenir bag.

"Thank you for recommending these!"

'Kegon Falls Shortbread' it read.

"That souvenir..." muttered Kaburagi as he stared from the side.

Enjou smiled.

"I never tried them myself, but I gave them to somebody who told me they were great."

At the next place we visited, No. 2 bumped into Wakaba-chan on purpose.

## Chapter 117

By Mao-chan's request, we were going to eat pancakes.

I'd wondered this before, but weren't pancakes more of a snack?

The menu was filled with pictures of whipped cream towers.

I couldn't understand how Hawaiians could eat pancakes as a staple. Wouldn't you get heartburn eating this for breakfast? Was it just a matter of getting used to it?

Still, I was pretty excited for it. I went with a chocolate, banana and whipped cream.



Mao-chan went with strawberry, while Ichinokura-san went with fruit pancakes with no cream.



“Wahh! It looks so yummy!”

Her eyes seemed to sparkle as our orders were carried to us. They were bigger than expected.

“Yours looks yummy too, Reika-oneesama!”

“Want to try some?”

“Can I!? Then please eat some of mine!”

And that’s how we happily split our orders. The chocolate banana pancakes were delicious! I liked chocolate and bananas with my crepes too, incidentally. Still wasn’t entirely sure how I felt about eating these sweet foods for dinner, but as a snack they were the best.

I wondered how on earth they cooked these so neatly though. In my old life the batter was always really thick, and I’d use a lot of it because I wanted my pancakes to turn out thick like in the pictures. The thickness worked of course, but they were always shaped more like weird pillows instead. And they were huge. And undercooked. On the inside at least, because the outside was always burned...

I doubted that anybody could really make such nice pancakes at home. It was probably impossible. Most likely those photos were faked.

Wah! Mao-chan’s strawberry and powdered sugar pancakes were delicious too!

“Would you like some chocolate banana pancakes, Ichinokura-sama? They are delicious, you know?”

“Try some of my strawberry too, Haruto-niisama!”

“Mmmm~ I think I’m good.”

Oh? He didn’t seem as enthused about our pancakes as he was about my kamameshi.

“Are you perhaps not so fond of sweet foods, Ichinokura-sama?”

“No, no, I am. It’s just that the cream looks a little overwhelming,” he said with a difficult smile.

I could kind of understand.

“Haruto-niisama, did you not want pancakes?”

Mao-chan looked a little sad. Ichinokura-san flew into a bit of a panic to reassure her.

“No, I did, Mao. Maybe I will try some of yours.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

He cut off a bit of her pancakes.

“Mn, delicious. Thank you, Mao.”

“You’re welcome. You can have more, you know?”

“But then there’d be less for you. I’ve got my own. Actually, you should try some of mine. Want a little?”

“Yeah!”

Mao-chan stuffed her cheeks with the fruit-laden pancake.

“Yummy! Ah, but I took too much of your fruit. I’m sorry. You can have some of my cream instead!” she said, before piling a mountain of cream onto his food.

Mao-chan...

“I really love you and Reika-neesama so I’m really happy that we came here.”

Mao-chan, what adorable things you say!

Ichinokura-san was smiling too.

“It looks like Mao adores you, Reika-san.”

“Mn. Reika-neesama is pretty and nice and smart, you know. She’s amazing.”

Mao-chan, I think you're overestimating me a little...

"I am glad that you think so highly of me, but I am nowhere near so special. For one thing I am not very smart..."

"That's not true! Sensei says that you had really good grades! And that you took the initiative to lead the class too."

"Sensei?"

Apparently her current home room teacher was the one who pushed me into being a member of the executive committee for the athletics meet as well as being class rep. When exactly did I take the initiative.

"Sensei said that you were reliable and smart when you were younger too. As expected of you, Reika-oneesama!"

"Umm, Mao-chan..."

"Ohh? You're actually quite amazing, Reika-san."

"She is! I want to be like Reika-oneesama too!"

"I see. Then you'll have to study, Mao."

"Yes!"

"..."

My primary school self was being incredibly glorified in Mao-chan's mind. I'd better study like hell for the mid-terms...

"Speaking of which, Yukino-kun said you were nice too, Reika-oneesama."

"Eh, Yukino-kun did!?"

That little Angel-chan said I was nice!?

"Yukino-kun is really popular, you know? He's like a little prince, so even people from middle or high school come to see him. But his body isn't strong so the Pivoine told us

to look after him.”

“I see.”

I did recall Enjou doing something like that.

“Is this Yukino-kun that cool?”

Ichinokura-san sounded interested now. Your cream isn’t decreasing at all, you know...

“He’s more cute than cool. Right, Reika-oneesama?”

“Yes.”

“We all say he’s like an angel.”

Aha. I knew everybody thought that too. He really was an angel.

I nodded along in assent.

“An angel. I think I’d like to meet him once too.”

“And Yukino-kun’s oniisama is dreamy too. One time he came to the salon to pick up Yukino-kun and he smiled at us and asked us to take care of Yukino-kun! All of the onesamas in the high grades were in love. He was like a prince.”

“That sounds kinda amazing.”

Prince? Enjou a prince!? Noooo! My cute little Mao-chan is being deceived!

“And the Prince had a really cool friend too. Reika-oneesama, you’re in their year aren’t you?”

“Ahhh, well...”

“How nice. You must be close, right? Yukino-kun was happy since it seemed like you and his brother got along.”

“Eh!?”



Yukino-kun, I'm sorry but that's a huge misunderstanding! Actually was this my fault~?

Oh no! What if Enjou started thinking like, 'Wow. What is this woman doing claiming that we're close to my little brother'!?

Besides Mao-chan who was smiling innocently, I could feel my stomach dropping.

I learned at that dinner that Mao-chan had somehow misunderstood me to be some kind of superwoman with brains as well as beauty. Since I didn't want to disappoint her, I studied extra hard. I even started seeing my notes in my dreams.

After drinking two energy drinks at once night after night, I made it into the ranking board for the first time. 29th place.

After all of that study, and I was only 29th... That was barely on it. No, but I really did try!

Still, everybody was focused on what was written on 1st place.

1. Takamichi Wakaba

2. Kaburagi Masaya

3. Enjou Shuusuke

4. Mizusaki Arima

So Wakaba-chan had finally overtaken both Kaburagi and Enjou to take first place—

The last time she had taken first it was because the Emperor was heartbroken. This time was different though. She beat him out with pure ability.

These were the first test results since entering 2nd year. The people around me seemed disquieted.

Kaburagi and Enjou came along. After looking at the board, Kaburagi raised an eyebrow.

“...Shuusuke, this Takamichi Wakaba was in your class, right?”

“Yep. She’s a girl with a lot of energy.”

“Hmmm~”

“Ah, speak of the devil. Takamichi-san, congratulations on 1st place.”

With bad timing, Wakaba-chan had come along right that moment.

“Eh-, 1st!? Th-... Thank you very much...”

Wakaba-chan was a lot more hesitant this time. Somebody must have given her quite the verbal lashing last time.

“So you’re Takamichi?”

“Eh- Yes...”

Wakaba-chan shrank further under his gaze.

After staring at her silently for a while, he simply went back.

“Bye then,” waved Enjou, before following after.

Wakaba-chan was left sitting on a bed of nails...

Ummmm~ By the way, I made it onto the ranking boards for the first time since getting into high school. Did anybody notice?

It’s right there you know? Kisshouin Reika, right next to the ’29’~

...

## CHAPTER 118

---

“It seems that recently a certain 2nd year has been getting ahead of herself,” began the President of the Pivoine.

After Wakaba-chan made 1st place, the way certain students treated her became noticeably more harsh.

I thought it was completely pointless, seeing as she made it there through ability. I hoped that I could make 1st place one day. First place... How nice...

No, even just the Top 5 would be great...

No, even 10th place... If I ever made 10th I'd be so besides myself with joy that I'd break into a belly dance.

Getting back to the point though, Kaburagi and Enjou were considered the pride of the more 'pure bred' Suiran students. That Wakaba-chan had threatened their places even as far back as 1st year was something many of them couldn't endure.

Plenty of other External Students did really well too, but Wakaba-chan was probably targeted because of her appearance. She looked like a total commoner. Not only that but sometimes she'd stare into space with her mouth hanging, like some kind of simpleton.

Thanks to that, plenty of people made comments like,

*“That's supposed to be who beat them?”*

*“Are you sure she didn't cheat?”*

And the fact that she was a girl that Enjou and Kaburagi spoke to made everything even worse. And Enjou was one thing, but Kaburagi almost never spoke to girls. For him to speak to her of his own volition stirred up some incredible jealousy.

Some of the girls in my group weren't too fond of her either.

Actually, sometimes they'd give me weird encouragements like, "Do your best, Reika-sama!". What exactly was I supposed to be doing my best in?

And you know, I *did* do my best for the mid-terms but even now none of them had noticed.

Next to the great 3-way struggle between 'Takamichi', 'Kaburagi' and 'Enjou', nobody had any attention to spare on the story of 'Kisshouin Reika, 29th place'. In the end the rankings notice was taken down without anybody noticing...

I tried so hard but nobody even praised me. Nobody noticed. That was so sad...

Which is why I decided to plan a little farce for myself.

I made sure to time it so that my results were *casually* lying around the living room when Oniisama came home. Of course, just having it lying around on its own was a little too obvious, so I made sure to have exercise printouts and stationery and textbooks and stuff as well. I was totally just looking through my bag for something when my results just *happened* to fall out.

Oh? That's weird. Oniisama wasn't home yet?

In the end I was forced to put the stationery back into my bag and wait. I took it out again.

...He wasn't coming.

I put it back in. Then took it all out.

After repeating this again and again, Oniisama finally appeared.

"Welcome home, Oniisama!"

"I'm back. What's all this on the table, Reika?"

"I was simply looking for something..."

I rustled my hand in my more-or-less empty bag. Oniisama! Look! Your little sister's

grades are right there!

To stall for time, I took out the contents of my pencilcase one by one.

Oniisama! Right there! Right in front of you!

“Hm? Oh, are these your grades?”

Oniisama finally noticed and picked it up.

“Goodness~ Oniisama! Stop! How embarrassing~”

Oh my~ With my bag in my hands, I was completely unable to stop Oniisama from picking it up~

“Wow! You made it to 29th place this time. You really did your best, Reika!”

“Ehh~ You exaggerate~”

“29th place in high school means your name was put up, right? You’re amazing. After trying so hard, I think you deserve a present, don’t you?”

“Ehh~ 29th place is nothing so deserving~”

“I don’t think that’s true. It’s a reward for all your effort.”

With that, Oniisama smiled and stroked my head.

Oniisamaaaa~!!

I really did my best, you know? But nobody noticed.

...Hahh, it finally, finally paid off.

Ichinokura-san brought me out to eat in celebration of the end of exams. This time Mao-chan was absent.

We were going to be eating at an Italian place he recommended. Not one of the fancy

expensive places, but like a small trattoria.

The moment we stepped inside, I could already smell the scent of roasted garlic.

I went with a bolognaise pasta.



On the other hand, Ichinokura-san decided on a pescatore.



We were also ordering a pizza margherita.



“You’ll have the bruschetta, obviously.”

“Well, yes.”

“Maybe we should get some salad too. What kind of salad do you like, Reika-san?”

“Caprese salad would be nice.”



“Then we’ll get that. Ah, but won’t that be a bit too much tomato? I’ll change my pasta order then. What should I get...”

I used to worry about whether or not to keep faking my eating habits, but ever since that night with the kamameshi I stopped with all pretences.

Ichinokura-san said that it was more fun to dine out with people who could eat a lot anyhow.

The food came one after another, so much that it felt like I was at an eating competition. Bring it all out!

Yummmyyy! The bolognaise was delicious. And the flat pasta was just the best! And the cheese on the margherita just *stretched* out!

Actually, god, why were Italian tomato dishes all so delicious? Apparently tomatoes were good for burning fat too. Delicious *and* good for dieting? It was too good for words!

Even I was full after all of that. But I ordered some tiramisu for dessert.



When Ichinokura-san asked me how my exams went, I modestly told him that they were acceptable.

“Mao tells me that you’re quite impressive at school.”

“She misunderstands. I think she overestimates me.”

“I hope you’ll help her with her studies too.”

Uhuhu, leave it to me. I, rank 29th Kisshouin Reika, can do primary school homework with my eyes closed.

When it was time to leave, Ichinokura-san bought some sweets to take back to Mao-chan since she couldn’t come today. That’s why I asked to pay for that instead. After being treated to so many meals, I wanted to at least do this. And I ate quite a bit, too...

I eventually convinced him. When I went to pay at the register though, I spotted some amaretti so I bought it to bring home for myself.

“Thank you for the sweets. I’ll make sure to tell Mao that it was from you.”

“Thank you for always treating me. Today’s food was just delicious. The caprese salad was one of the best three I have ever had.”

“Really? I’m glad you enjoyed it so much. That place is really picky about tomatos.”

“No wonder it was so delicious then. But the cheese was wonderful too.”

“The cheese? Then how about I take you to a risotto place next time? There’s this blue cheese risotto you just have to try.”



“Risotto!? I love risotto.”

“Then that settles it.”

When I returned home from a great dinner with Ichinokura-san, I saw Oniisama reading a travel magazine. Was he planning on going somewhere?

I entered my room and then had just one of the amaretti. Yummy...

Tsuruhana-san’s group tried to trip Wakaba-chan in the hallway, but Wakaba-chan vaulted over each one like an athlete doing hurdles.

And in her gym class, only Wakaba-chan was forced to play dodgeball during a basketball game...

I was starting to worry about her a little, but she still seemed totally unaffected, so I hoped she could get through this.

As bad as I felt about it, if the President of the Pivoine really had it out for her, there wasn’t much I could do.

Tsk. I was shifting responsibilities now, but what the heck was Kaburagi doing.

What happened to his destiny?

## CHAPTER 119

---

Normally I had lunch with Serika-chan and the others. Today was an exception to that.

At the behest of the President of the Pivoine, every member was currently assembled in the cafeteria together.

“It’s nice having lunch to strengthen the bonds within the Pivoine once in a while,” she said, “And to begin with, these seats were arranged for our exclusive use, so I think this is the best place for us anyhow.”

The Pivoine elitists nodded at her words. The President seemed to be in a good mood.

Ah, it would have been nicer to eat with my friends though... If possible I’d rather not become the leader of yet another village.

Unfortunately I wanted to avoid drama, so here I was, giving her words a vague smile as I ate my lunch. Enjou and Kaburagi usually ate here anyway. Despite the crowd today, they seemed to be ignoring it all and talking about sports.

“I knew it would be calming to spend time with proper students of Suiran. Ever since entering high school there have been so many outsiders unaccustomed to our ways.”

“I know how you feel. It’d be nice if they’d stop harming our image,” chimed in one of the boys.

“How are the new first years?”

“It’s still too early to tell, but at least nobody has stirred anything up yet.”

“I see. If anything happens, as a Pivoine you should teach them their proper place.”

“I understand. We won’t let them do as they wish in our school.”

“It’s fine that they admire Suiran and all, but overreaching their stations will bring them more trouble than anybody else.”

Wow...

Usually I just treated the Pivoine as a nice place to eat snacks in, but there were a lot more elitists than I had expected... Some of them were extraordinarily proud about being a member of the Pivoine.

No wonder they got along so badly with the Student Council.

At least last year they had Tomoe-senpai to even things out, but...

“By the way, there’s actually a 2nd year causing problems...”

Called it.

“Ah. That Takamichi girl?”

“Yes,” answered a girl, “When I saw her wearing gumboots with our uniform I felt faint...”

“That was certainly astounding. How could anybody have so little sense...”

“I know, right?” agreed another boy, “I can’t believe the way she shamed us in public. *This* is how we’re representing ourselves outside?”

“And the other day I saw her jumping along down the hallway,” added yet another girl. “She’s so barbaric that just seeing her irritates me.”

“Doesn’t she come to school with bedhair at times? Does she not even know how to take care of her own appearance?” asked somebody else.

“Saw her running to the train station too, you know? It was so disgraceful that I very nearly got out of my car to tell her off.”

“Heavens... At any rate, we can all agree that she doesn’t belong in Suiran. To begin with, who knows if those grades are her own ability...”

“Beating Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama...? How could that ever happen...”

With that, the conversation shifted to complaints about how she was basically tarnishing the two’s reputation.

Honestly, I didn’t know what they were clamouring about. What were they even

expecting? For Wakaba-chan to lower her marks on purpose? She was a scholarship student.

If they really had problems with this then they should have just told Kaburagi and Enjou to study harder. Just kidding. Of course nobody could do that. But still, it would have been a lot more constructive than all of this grumbling.

Also I'm pretty sure the jumping in the hallway was because people were trying to trip her. And why were we even complaining about her hair or gumboots or running? Were we her mother-in-laws or something?

"At any rate, that girl needs to be watched. Those of us in 2nd year need to pay special attention to her. Reika-sama."

"...Eh!?"

I was supposed to be in invisible-mode so why did my name get called?

"I hope you'll cooperate with us on this matter as well. Please purge the undesirables."

Please what?

Her choice of words was so scary that it was all I could do to smile.

I looked around the table for help, but Sarara-sama was already in her own little book-world having already finished lunch. Fuyuko-sama in the same group was just smiling leisurely as always. Enjou and Kaburagi who were the cause of all this were still chatting happily amongst themselves...

Uu, purge? Am I Catherine de Médicis? I don't have it in me to send Wakaba-chan a poisoned glove... I'm just a Rococo Queen. Oh, but the Rococo Queen's beloved macarons were introduced by Catherine de Médicis weren't they? O great macaron bringer, I pay my thanks to thee.

I think I'll buy some on the way home.

Exhausted from that lunch with the Pivoine, I was on the way back to my classroom when I spotted Wakaba-chan.

She was tottering along with a heavy-looking pile of exercise books. Maybe somebody had pushed the job onto her.

There were a number of people walking nearby, but none of them offered any help, either... What happened to being raised as gentleman here!

That was when Fellow Stalking Horse ran over and took half of the pile from her.

"I'll help."

"Eh? But we're in different classes."

"It's fine. So we're bringing these to the staff room?"

"No, to a faculty room, but..."

"Okay."

Stalking Horse began walking briskly away. Recovering from her surprise, Wakaba-chan quickly followed after him.

Ooh! It was good to see Fellow Stalking Horse doing a proper job of the Stalking Horse thing. Well done, Comrade. I expected no less from a righteous Stalking Horse like you.

Unfortunately some of the girls who saw this were muttering loathingly about 'cosying up to boys'.

I wonder if she's going to be okay over the next two years.

Feeling even more exhausted, I headed to the Petite Pivoine for some soothing.

It was arranged that I would help Mao-chan with her studies. She was in 2nd grade, so it was obviously no problem.

Once I arrived she and Yuuri-kun welcomed me in with a smile. So cute.

The two of them began working on their arithmetic homework. While they were doing that I pulled out my needle felting work and began poking away.

“What’s that?”

I looked up to find that it was Yukino-kun the angel looking on in interest.

“This is needle felting, a method of creating shapes made from thread using a needle.”

“Oh, that seems fun...”

Since he seemed pretty enthused, I considered letting him try.

I asked him as much and he nodded with a resplendent smile before sitting down next to me and going at it.

“Try making a circle first.”

“Okay.”

With just a little guidance, Yukino-kun was getting better and better at it. Maybe he was just good with his fingers.

Maybe the obsession that boys had with things actually made them pretty suited for handicrafts. Oh, speaking of which we had a new 1st year boy join. Even though he was new and a boy, he was without doubt way above my level.

“It’s done!”

His completed work was a white hemisphere with green ears and red eyes.

...A rabbit?

“Is this a rabbit?”

“Yes. It’s a snow rabbit. I’m not very healthy so when I was smaller I couldn’t play in the snow. That’s why Niisama made snow rabbits to give to me.”

“I see.”



Who would have thought that villain had done something so cute!

“Niisama and Masaya-niisama used to make snowmen that I could see from my window. Masaya-niisama said that snowmen always had to wear red buckets, so he went and bought small buckets just for that.”

Kaburagi!? And to think that he had weird fixations for his snowmen too...

“You get along very well with your Oniisama then?”

“Yes,” he smiled bashfully, “Can I keep this rabbit? I want to show it to Niisama.”

Cuuuute!

Somehow I had just a tiny bit better opinion of Enjou and Kaburagi now...

## CHAPTER 120

---

In order to maintain Mao-chan's image of me, I was going to work hard at cram school once again.

Next time I was aiming for rank 25. For now I was just taking little steps. But one day...

With renewed determination in my heart I opened my exercise book. It was around that time that Umewaka-kun and his friends arrived.

"Hey Kisshouin-san," he said, "I just heard but apparently the guy over by the door, second row from the front, is actually from Suiran too. Do you know him?"

"Eh?"

This was the first *I'd* heard of any Suiran student going to my cram school. I squinted to get a better look at him but I had no idea who he was.

"I cannot say that I do... I suspect that we have simply never had a class together."

"Really? But he seems to know you, Kisshouin-san."

"Truly?"

"I hear he only started coming to this cram school this year. If you're from the same school, maybe you could talk to him?"

"I suppose I could."

Since he was from Suiran I decided I should at least greet him.

It wasn't possible now that our teacher had arrived but I could do so during the break.

When that break came around, I walked over to him but when he saw me his expression turned obviously frightened. Eh? How come?

"I have been told that you attend Suiran. Might this be true?"



“Ah! Yes...”

Apparently this diligent and somewhat plain-looking boy was named Tagaki-kun, and had entered the high school as an External.

“My name is Kisshouin Reika. May we get along.”

“Yes, I know who you are of course...” he said oddly fearfully.

Come on, is there really a need to be like that?

“What class are you in, Tagaki-kun? Who do you attend Suiran with?”

“Ummm... I’m in Enjou-san’s class...”

“Enjou-sama?”

Didn’t that mean he was in the same class as Wakaba-chan?

“Then that would place you with Takamichi-san. Are you close with her?”

“Eh!? No, not particularly...”

“I see. What is she like in class? Does she have friends?”

“Ah... I think she does...”

So she made friends too. Thank goodness. I was worried she would be completely isolated. It made sense though, since it wasn’t like the whole school hated her. Only some people hated her. Some rather troublesome people, though.

Before I returned to my seat, I told him to talk to me if he had any questions since he was attending here alone.

“He was from Suiran, right?”

“Yes. But because our classes are different he is honestly little more than a stranger. He seems to know of me, however.”

“What’s this? Kisshouin-san, are you famous at your school?”

“Kisshouin-san stands out after all~”

“Actually,” I explained, “I have been attending Suiran since primary school, which is why I am better-known than those who joined later.”

By some chance my eyes passed over Tagaki-kun’s back. Maybe he noticed somehow because he turned around and our eyes met before he quickly turned away. Hmmm~ I wonder how he saw me...

“Oh? Kisshouin-san, could he be scared of you?”

Leave it alone, please.

Later at home I got an email from Bea-tan.

“Do your best! I’m your friend, Reika-tan! Your confidante, Beatrice.”

Thank you, Bea-tan...

On a clear, beautiful morning, I bumped into Enjou at the entrance to the school building.

“Morning, Kisshouin-san.”

“Good morning, Enjou-sama.”

And then for some reason we ended up heading to class together. We passed by a number of girls who stopped to stare at him in a daze.

I was so jealous... I wasn’t even doing anything but pretty much every boy averted his eyes from me in fear...

“What’s wrong, Kisshouin-san?”

“Nothing.”

“I see,” he smiled brightly.

Some of the girls watching on began squealing.

“Are you not with Kaburagi-sama on this morning?”

“Well it’s not like we go to school together. Wait, don’t tell me you think that each morning we happily ride the same car here? Wouldn’t that be pretty creepy for two high school boys? We go to school at the same time, so I guess we bump into each other a lot.”

“My, is that how it was?”

But I’ve seen you two get out of the same car a few times, yanno.

Maybe he noticed something from my expression because he added,

“Speaking of which, there actually was a period when I went to pick him up. I couldn’t really take my eyes off him at the time. I still have to thank you for your help back then.”

Enjou flashed another smile.

...Back then, huh.

“It was thanks to you risking life and limb that we somehow got Masaya to cheer up. Thanks again.”

“You are welcome...”

The way he worded that particularly annoyed me. So he was the one who made me out to be a reject woman!

“And it looks like my brother has been in your care too. The other day he brought home this toy that he said you taught him to make.”

“Oh, the snow rabbit!”

Yukino-kun. He was a pure-white little angel-chan, unlike his wicked black-hearted older brother. I prayed that he wouldn’t be led astray by Enjou’s evil influence.

“So it’s called needle felting. I had no idea you had that kind of hobby. My brother was

quite happy about it.”

“I see. Then it makes me happy that he enjoyed it.”

I thought back on his innocent smile and couldn’t help but smile myself.

“It seems that the snow rabbit had special importance to him. He told me about how you and Kaburagi-sama built snowmen for him. You really spoil him, Enjou-sama.”

“Well, we’ve got quite an age difference after all. And he hasn’t got the best constitution either. Doesn’t your own brother spoil you quite a bit too? Why according to the rumours, you’re practically a brocon, Kisshouin-san. Although lately it’s been leaning towards fathercon instead.”

*Tanuki!*

“It is certainly true that my brother and I have always been close, but I have not the faintest idea how the accusations of being a fathercon came about.”

“Ohh? I see.”

Enjou gave an amused smile.

Still under the gaze of other girls, we walked together as far as the front of his classroom, before he stopped at the door-frame.

“Oh, by the way,” he muttered, “Is it because you love your much older brother so much that your taste is also for older men?”

“Eh?”

Enjou grinned at me and then headed inside.

...Scary. Who was he talking about just now?

Feeling gloomy despite the nice weather, I headed for my own classroom when a small racket caught my attention. It was an excited-looking Nonose-san and Miharu-chan.

“I told you that the chamberlain wasn’t suited for the princess! A princess needs a prince!”

“But I was rooting for the chamberlain.”

“Why not console him?”

Whatever it was, they seemed to be having fun chatting about it.

Nonose-san and Miharu-chan went and called out to Class Rep. He seemed delighted that Miharu-chan was coming over to talk to him.

As for me, Ru’ne-chan and the others mobbed me and asked what Enjou and I were chatting to happily about.

## CHAPTER 121

---

Ichinokura-san had completely settled into the role of my foodie friend. Our preferences in food just meshed really well.

Thanks to that we would eat out together roughly once a week. Just the other day before I had school and he had work, we ended up having sushi for breakfast at the Tsukiji fish markets. Ikura is the best!

Because it was a little rushed though, I didn't get to eat as much as I usually did for breakfast. I was starving before lunch even hit...

Anyhow, over half of my outings with Ichinokura-san had Mao-chan with us. Sometimes even Yuuri-kun was in attendance. Thanks to that I grew closer and closer with her, and even Yuuri-kun seemed to be relaxed around me.

Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun were family friends and had gone to the same kindergarten. I couldn't help but think of Sakura-chan and Akizawa-kun. But while Sakura-chan was actively removing obstacles and responsible for any and all progress, Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun seemed more like a proper couple.

"Mao, have you decided on desert?"

"Mmmm... I'm stuck."

The two of them were sitting in front of me and peering at the same menu together.

"Which ones are you stuck on?"

"I can't decide if I want this chiffon cake with the fruit ice cream, or if I want the blueberry cheesecake tart."

"Then how about I order the other one and go halves with you."

"Okay! Thanks, Yuuri!"

Hahh, how heartwarming. Going halvesies so that your cute girlfriend can get both. I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

“Reika-san,” said Ichinokura-san from beside me, “Have you decided on your dessert too?”

Oh. Right. No time to be staring at these two.

The strawberry tart looked really good, but lately I was really rocking the tiramisu. I was trying them out all over the place and deciding on a ranking.

“What’s up?”

“I cannot decide between the tiramisu and the strawberry tart.”

“Oh, is that all? Then you should just eat both. It should be a piece of cake for you!”

...Yes, I suppose it would be.

But I *had* just finished a main course meal. Eating two desserts afterwards would be pushing it even for me. I mean, sure, I could definitely finish both, but it would be pushing my dignity as a young girl.

And also I was kind of scared of ruining the image that Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun had of ‘Reika-oneesama’. There was something wrong when your respected oneesama was a massive glutton.

“No, I think I really will simply go with just the tart...” I said bitterly.

“We’re here already. You should just have both.”

“No, just the strawberry tart is enough.”

Forgive me, Tiramisu.

We ordered. Ichinokura-san was just having coffee.

“Huhu, this cheesecake is so yummy too. Thanks, Yuuri.”

“Mm.”

Mao-chan seemed to be really enjoying herself over there with Yuuri-kun’s dessert. There’s something about eating sweet things that just make you smile, isn’t there~

“Aah. I’m going to get fat at this rate.”

Mao-chan’s words were a shock.

Actually, after going eating every week like this I was starting to suspect that I was getting a little round again...

“What are you talking about, Mao,” said Ichinokura-san, “Kids shouldn’t worry about that. You need to eat lots so you can grow up.”

“But I don’t want to be fat. Girls are all like that, right, Reika-oneesama?”

“Eh!? Well yes...”

“See! Reika-oneesama said so too. You’re skinny, Haruto-niisama, which is why you don’t get it.”

Come to think of it, he really was still skinny even after eating so much. I don’t think I could be any more jealous of him. Could it be that he was one of those types who just couldn’t get fat? The dream of all girls!?

Ichinokura-san sighed.

“I don’t know why you want to be so skinny for, but I think girls who are a little rounder are much cuter than girls who are skin and bones. I can tell you that guys all think this.”

“I don’t know... Really~?”

I don’t know... Really~?

“Yuuri-kun, you agree with me, don’t you?”

“What? Do you, Yuuri!?”

Mao-chan turned an intense gaze on him.

“Ah... I... think you’re perfect the way you are, Mao...”

Despite being overwhelmed by her attitude, Yuuri-kun still managed a perfect



response.

Thanks to that, Mao-chan was in a great mood again and went back to eating her chiffon cake.

“Reika-san, I don’t think you should force yourself to diet either. You’re skinny even without all that.”

Eh-, me, skinny!? What the heck. Maybe my stomach was just my imagination then...

“Oh, by the way. When I told Yukino-kun about how I go eating with you, Reika-oneesama, he said he wished he could go too.”

“Eh-, Yukino-kun did!?”

“Apparently he’s really taken an interest in that crafts thing you taught him the other day. He told me to ask you to teach him again.”

“My...!”

Maybe I was about to get an angel for a disciple! Aahh, but behind the angel was a wicked older brother that I didn’t want to get involved with... What was I going to do?

For now I decided to finish up the strawberry tart.

The four of us went for a walk afterwards. On Ichinokura-san’s shoulder was something shiny. I reached out for it and... silver hair?

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, you had something stuck to your shoulder, Ichinokura-sama.”

“What? Oh, this might be from my cat.”

“Cat? You have a cat?”

“Yeah.”

“Might I ask what breed?”

“She’s himalayan. Her name’s Alice.”

“Himalayan...”

...They had long hair.

I was starting to recall a certain someone...

“Reika-sama, Reika-sama,” whispered Mao-chan as she tugged on my sleeve, “The cat that Haruto-niisama has is a little bit of a fatty,” she said like it was some kind of secret, covering her smile with her hand.

Ichinokura-san turned around and glared jokingly at her.

“I can hear you, Mao.”

“Huhuhu, it’s the truth~”

“Alice isn’t fat. Her fur just makes it look like that.”

Mao-chan turned to me and shook her head.

‘It’s absolutely not the fur.’

I was more worried about finding out how much Ichinokura-san loved this cat though. One dog maniac was enough for me.

Luckily, it turns out that his love for Alice-chan was at a very normal level.

Thank goodness... If I suddenly got an email from him that read, ‘I’m Alice! Nice to meet you! Today I snuggled to sleep with Haru-tan!’ I don’t know what I’d do.

Wakaba-chan’s enemies weren’t limited to the girls who made up Kaburagi and Enjou’s fans. Some of the boys, particularly the Externals who entered in high school, were hostile because they were jealous of her grades. Being too exemplary could be rough too, couldn’t it...

But like Tagaki-kun had mentioned, a number of girls were friends with her, so

Wakaba-chan seemed okay. Sometimes people would badmouth her, but she seemed to be filled with energy each day, so I was hoping that things would stay peaceful.

—I was naïve.

One day, the Pivoine President brought her 3rd year followers and paid a visit to the 2nd year floor.

## CHAPTER 122

---

*Tree doctors (jumokus) in Japan are officially certified arborists who have passed an examination accredited by the Ministry of Agriculture.*

*Seven Herbs of Spring. The custom of eating seven-herb congee on the Festival of Seven Herbs is said to bring longevity and health.*

---

Wakaba-chan happened to have been walking down the hallway and talking with her friends when it happened, which is why it took the President no time at all to spot her.

“Takamichi-san.”

“Yes? Ah!”

The moment she saw who had spoken her expression tightened. The girls who had been with her discreetly moved away.

“Takamichi-san, is enough not yet enough? How much further must you besmirch the name of Suiran before you are satisfied?”

“Eh...? Have I done something again...?” timidly asked Wakaba-chan.

The President’s eyes immediately narrowed.

“*Done* something! Today you *rode to school on a bicycle*, didn’t you. A student of *Suiran*, riding to school on a bicycle? What on earth were you thinking!”

The bystanders in the hallway began to whisper amongst themselves. Wakaba-chan, you rode to school on a bike...?

“I’m sorry... Umm... There wasn’t anything in the rules forbidding it so I thought it would be okay...”

“*Rules!?* It’s because nobody at Suiran has *ever* done so that such a rule wasn’t necessary! Shameful! Disgraceful!”

“I’m sorry...”

Wakaba-chan lowered her head in a bow.

By now a number of students were directing unhappy expressions at her.

“A bicycle...?!” frowned my friends from beside me.

“Takamichi-san, this had better not be happening *every* day.”

“It isn’t! It’s just that today my train was cancelled because of an accident, and then I was worried about being late, so I thought maybe riding a bicycle would... No. I’m really sorry...”

But Wakaba-chan didn’t live very close to school did she. Just how freaking far did she pedal that thing!? Amazing. Oh, I suppose now wasn’t the time to be feeling admiration.

Wakaba-chan was looking really down. The President kept her eyes on her while letting out an affected sigh.

“Takamichi-san. Are you sure you’re attending the right school? If you wanted to ride a bicycle to school then wouldn’t it have been better to attend one of the public schools at your house?”

“I’m really very sorry...”

“At any rate, there will not be a second display of this disgrace. Your actions are becoming too much to bear. You had best be prepared if you bring any further shame upon Suiran.”

“I’m really sorry!”

Wakaba-chan continued to bow over and over while the President’s followers chirped comments like “Aren’t you getting full of yourself just because your grades are good?” and “Learn your place already.”

I suppose it was pretty bad for a student at Suiran to ride a bike to school, but was all this really necessary...?

“What’s wrong, Takamichi!?”

Attracted by the disturbance, Fellow Stalking Horse rushed onto the scene.

“And what are you supposed to be?” glared the President.

“I’m Mizusaki, a member of the Student Council.”

“I know that, obviously. I’m asking what a Student Council member thinks he’s doing here.”

“Resolving the problems in the school is the duty of the Student Council,” he replied with a severe expression.

Despite the way Stalking Horse towered over her, the President wasn’t cowered in the least and snorted mockingly at him.

“You seem to be feeling quite good about yourself for a lowly Student Council member. Even impudence has its limits!”

“Wha-...!”

“Stop, stop Mizusaki-kun! I was wrong, okay? Please, just stop,” begged Wakaba-chan in a panic.

She was pulling on his arm and quietly trying to stop him. I guess she didn’t want the incident to get any bigger than it already was.

“I’m sorry. From today onwards I won’t do such a thing again. I’m terribly sorry about today,” bowed Wakaba-chan once again.

The President huffed, but decided that it was enough.

“There will not be a second time.”

“...I understand.”

After directing a cold gaze at Wakaba-chan and Fellow Stalking Horse, the President turned on her heel and left. She was walking down the hallway when she spotted me and smiled.

“My! Reika-sama! Gokigen’yoh.”

“Gokigenyoh, Youko-sama.”

Uwah, she found me...

“I know it must be rough being swarmed by all these stray dogs. If anything happens, don’t hesitate to tell us, okay?”

“Goodness, hohoho...”

Stray dogs...?

I could feel my expression cramping. Everyone was looking at us now. My stomach hurt... Stop glaring, Fellow Stalking Horse.

“I hear that we have new tea at the salon today. You must come by.”

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

The President nodded magnanimously at me before heading back to the 3rd year classrooms.

Once they were gone, the people left behind in the hallway went into an uproar about what happened. The students that were particularly proud of being from Suiran began scolding her, so Wakaba-chan apologised to them as well.

Fellow Stalking Horse shielded her from them and then asked what happened.

“Actually, I end up biking it to school today...”

“Bike!? Why were you doing *that*?”

“This morning my train was stopped and it didn’t seem like I’d be able to find another way here on time. I didn’t want to lose the money for perfect attendance so I just...”

“...Couldn’t you have just gotten a late note in that case?”

“Aahh!”

Her whole body slumped. Wakaba-chan, I think the cost for that money is getting a little too high...

Later that day, Wakaba-chan stealthily rode her bike home...

Ever since incurring the wrath of the President, criticism of Wakaba-chan increased sharply. What was particularly rough was the way some people would pretend that she wasn't there and badmouthed her.

Was she going to be okay...? She looked happy enough, but she had to be hurting inside...

One day I caught sight of Wakaba-chan heading into the Suiran Forest after school.

Suiran was well-known for all of the greenery it had. We called the most thickly grown region the Suiran Forest. With how thickly the vegetation grew, the centre was dim and dark. Because nobody really wanted to get dirty, pretty much nobody went in there. So why was Wakaba-chan...

I suddenly gasped as the words 'Sea of Trees Manjuu' flashed through my head.

It can't be!

I rushed after Wakaba-chan in panic. Don't be hasty, Wakaba-chan!

When I caught up with her I spotted Wakaba-chan together with the gardener. The man had a tree doctors certification and worked here exclusively for Suiran.

They talked for a bit before the gardener handed Wakaba-chan some sort of bag. Huh?

After talking for a while longer, Wakaba-chan waved goodbye and then went back the way she came with a smile.

I made sure she was gone before approaching the old gardener. Could it be that he talked her down...?

"My apologies for interrupting you at work. That girl from before. What was she doing here?"

"Eh!"



He turned around in surprise.

“Ohh, you scared me. I didn’t think anybody else was here. Are you asking about Wakaba-chan? She was here looking for wild vegetables.”

“...Vegetables?”

“There are a lot of weeds that grow around here, you see, and sometimes she comes looking for them. Taranome angelica shoots, renmai fern, myouga ginger, that sort of thing. ”

“Those grow here!?”

I had no idea! There was food growing here in Suiran!?

“Lots of them do. Although nobody really notices since they have no interest I suppose. This is the first time any student has gone looking for them. Last year I caught Wakaba-chan wandering around here with an encyclopaedia of wild herbs. I asked her what she was doing and she told me she was looking for ingredients. She was interesting so I told her where she could find the good stuff.”

“Is that... not a problem?”

“Well they just sort of pop up on their own.

Nobody really planted them there. Picking flowers from the gardens would be one thing, but I don’t think the school would mind these at all.”

“My. I see.”

Thank god Wakaba-chan hadn’t been implicated in thievery.

“Apparently she was here looking for tempura ingredients today. She really wanted the myouga it seems, but it’s a bit early for those. She told me she wanted to spice them eat them with hiyayakko.



*Hiyayakko (冷奴 cold tofu) is a Japanese dish made with chilled tofu and toppings, above with myouga.*

In the end I told her to come back in a week. Oh, and she was looking for Jew's ear as well. Said she wanted to make cellophane noodle salad."

"..."

...Far from suffering, Wakaba-chan was enjoying every bit of Suiran to the fullest.

"Wakaba-chan is growing her own herbs and small vegetables too, so she comes here a lot for advice on growing them. Why, the other day she came here telling me about how she was in a bit of a pickle because her mint had overgrown. Because she didn't know what to do with it all, she tried making mint tea she told me, and had brought a flask of it along. She really is an interesting girl."

The gardener laughed.

I wasn't without worries though. Just because the staff and administration were okay with it, if her haters or the Pivoine heard about this it would probably only fuel the fire. I could already hear rumours about how she was too poor to buy groceries... Not that her family actually was in poverty.

"Umm... Her ingredient searching is all well and good, but if possible could you keep it a secret from any other students who come asking? Some people might have a problem with it..."

"Hm? Really? Well, come to think of it maybe some people would. Then it's just going to be a secret between us then. I'd feel bad if anything spoilt her fun. Ah, speaking of which, she came here in the middle of winter looking for spring herbs. Later she told me that she ended up making seven-herb congee and now she would be healthy all

year. She has refined taste, doesn't she."

"Seven-herb congee...?"

Would you really call that refined...? A high school girl who braved the cold of winter to go ingredient-searching at her school, all because she wanted to make fresh seven-herb congee.

Apparently Wakaba-chan's personality was both more bold and more shameless than I could have ever imagined...

But, well, as long as she was having fun...

For you, I head out to the fields to pick spring greens while snow falls upon my sleeves—

## CHAPTER 123

---

*In Japan, there is a folk belief regarding wooden buildings. When a tree is cut and used as a wooden pillar, if it is placed upside-down relative to its position in life, it can make strange noises at night, bring the house misfortune, or even engender disasters.*

*In a twist of the regular folklore are the patterned pillars of the Youmeimon gate at Nikkou Toushouguu shrine. One of them has reversed patterns but is said to be deliberate as a means of warding off a calamity that was prophesied to occur upon the perfection of the temple.*

---

I woke up early the next morning and went to school an hour early.

After walking down the empty hallway I glanced into Wakaba-chan's classroom. Good. Nobody was here yet.

I had already checked in advance which desk was Wakaba-chan's. All that was left now was to hide my letter in it. I then dashed out of the room before anybody caught me!

When I entered my own empty classroom, the elation of accomplishment welled up inside me. Mission complete.

Inside that letter was a list of things to be careful about if you were going to attend Suiran. No running outside while wearing our uniform, no napping on the train in our uniforms, avoid running in the hallways, stuff like that. Also other things like no rainboots, no raincoats, fans were fine but only folding fans and not uchiwas, no earmuffs, just as many things like that that I could think of. I mean, I didn't think *any* high school girl in Tokyo was going to be wearing a raincoat to school, but after remembering the gumboots I realised that it could actually happen one day so I wrote it down anyway.

I also made sure to write down warnings for the Pivoine. Actually, you could say that this was the key focus of my letter. Don't approach the reserved seats, move out of the way for members if they're coming the other way, oh, and when it came to upperclassmen pretty much everybody did that along with a greeting and bow while waiting for them to pass. I even added in little details like which the President's favourite menu items were and that it would be better to avoid ordering those.

I also included a list of every Pivoine member in high and middle school. The little peony badges could be hard to see so it was better to know them by face. I didn't know all of the Petite members myself so I didn't include them. The Petite salon was separate from ours so it would probably be okay. I did note that they sometimes had older siblings in the Pivoine proper though, so it would be better not to make light of them for being little. Of particular note was Yukino-kun in year one who was better to stay away from entirely.

Other advice included a list of names of the more reliable teachers, as well as a list of teachers who were completely in the Pivoine's camp.

The letter also included a warning that if she went looking for ingredients in Suiran or if she was feeding a cat or other possible scenarios that she made sure to check her surroundings for possible onlookers first. Of course I couldn't just write 'Be careful while foraging for food!' it would pretty much give me away right off the bat.

Ah, yes. This letter was written anonymously of course. To avoid being identified the envelope was blank and I avoided handwriting as well. For a while I considered using gloves to avoid fingerprints too, but then I remembered that this wasn't a crime or anything so I decided not to bother.

My own safety came first which is why I couldn't just cover for her in public, so the best I could do was help her avoid trouble with this. My apologies.

Just in case, the letter included an afternote that asked her not to show it to anybody else. I'm counting on you, Wakaba-chan. Please don't suddenly go "Huh~? What's this letter here~?" the moment you step into class.

I had come a whole hour early so now that I had delivered the letter there wasn't anything for me to do. What now...

I looked out the window and saw members of the sports club already hard at practice. I never really thought about it.

After thinking about it for a little, if Wakaba-chan came early and saw the letter, with nobody else around I would be outed on the spot. It might be a good idea to find somewhere else to spend the time, at least until more students came. Maybe the salon~?

Suddenly, the idea of going to the usually abandoned library occurred to me. I could begin secretly studying in preparation for the next exams. Ohh! What a model student I am!

So when I arrived at the library I was shocked that people were already there. It occurred to other students to study early in the morning!?

I took a seat in the corner and began skimming through today's work. I was making a lot more progress here in the library since there were less distractions than in my room at home. Maybe it would be better to do all my studying here.

In my concentration I didn't notice the time pass. Before I knew it the majority were at school already, so I picked up my bag and went back to class. Taking the chance, I took a peek at Wakaba-chan as well, but she didn't behave any differently so I could relax for the moment.

Waking up early was starting to take its toll on me. I was really sleepy. I decided not to fight it so I opened my textbook, leaned my chin in my hands, faced downwards and then took a nap as I pretended to study.

Thanks to this flawless technique and my mastery of it, not once had I been caught napping in class before.

Later that day I stayed back because of my duties as a class rep. I hadn't managed to get the busywork for the handouts done during break time, so I was doing them now. Not that I minded though, since I didn't have club activities today anyhow.

While we were working, Class Rep lowered his voice and began to tell me about his progress with Miharu-chan.

"You know, it kind of feels like recently I'm getting to talk with Honda-san more. Nonose-san is in our class so she comes to visit sometimes too. When that happens the two of them sometimes come talk to me."

"Goodness, lucky you."

"Hehe. We only began talking after that field trip when Nonose-san took over your class rep duties. Honda-san helped that time too, and we ended up chatting a lot. After

that Nonose-san and I started to get to know each other better. She was the one who told me that Honda-san was getting close with a boy, remember? It turns out that it wasn't anything romantic. Well, not that I asked directly though."

"I see~"

"It turns out that Honda-san just thinks that Enjou-kun is really cool. Apparently that isn't the same as liking him romantically though. Actually, she said she thought he suited you."

"*Haaah!?* What on earth does that mean!?" I couldn't help but shout.

That wasn't something I could overlook.

"Eh-, ah, ummmm~ ...On the other hand, Nonose-san said that Kaburagi-kun was more suited to you, but I told them that I was neutral."

"Wha-! You were supposed to deny them!"

Oh my god. Yet *another* crazy conversation happened without my knowing.

"Are you not supposed to be on my side, Class Rep!"

"Mm, of course I am. If I can help then I will. The reason I got closer to Honda-san recently is thanks to you being late during the excursion as well, Kisshouin-san. I knew I could count on you, Love Guru!"

"Well, you are welcome. But more importantly, you need to dispel strange rumours about Enjou-sama, Kaburagi-sama and I!"

"Mmmmm..."

"Class Rep!"

"I mean, I want to help, but these rumours have been around since primary school. I'm not sure it would even be possible to clear them up."

"What!?"

Why!? I almost never interacted with them!

I fell onto my desk in shock.

I didn't want to gain enemies because of these baseless rumours that I didn't know about, and if those two knew then what was most mortifying was if those two thought I really *was* interested in them!

And what if I became even more unpopular because of this...

"Oh? Kisshouin-san, some of your curls are going the other way you know?"

"Eh?"

I raised my head from the desk to find Class Rep lightly pulling some of the hair behind my head.

"See? Just this area."

I used a pair of mirrors to check the back of my head. It was true. Looking carefully, about ten of the curls further in were actually going the wrong way.

"What on earth!?"

A flaw in my perfect hair!

"Nobody would have noticed since they're so far in. I only saw them by chance too."

My hair was permed, so it must have been a careless mistake...

Oh no... It might have been hidden, but would it be better to get my hair permed again...? I might not have noticed so far but now that I knew it was really bothering me.

"It feels like a good omen somehow."

Class Rep was carefree while I was upset about it.

Stop treating my hair like the pillar of Youmeimon!

The next day I arrived at school to find a pleased-looking Class Rep headed my way.



“Today I happened to meet Honda-san in front of the gates, and then we talked about classwork all the way until the classrooms. It’s thanks to your blessing, Guru!”

“I see...”

This morning I checked countless times to make sure that they weren’t visible.

I wonder how that even happened though.

...Could it be that they foresaw calamity upon the perfection of my hair and deliberately left it incomplete!? Then maybe these locks of hair were actually Evil-Warding Hair Locks!

“Those reversed curls are a bit like a four-leafed clover aren’t they.”

“...”

As expected of the maidenly Class Rep... I see. So to a maiden a four-leafed clover would come to mind before a temple warding against evil then.

“I’ve even got plans with Honda-san and Nonose-san to study for the upcoming exams together. I’ve been really lucky since discovering those curls yesterday.”

“Good for you...”

Well, I suppose if he was happy about it then I was too. Studying with the person you like. It was a heart-thumping and irresistible scenario to any maiden. I’ve liked the idea since my last life. Not once had it actually happened though.

So apparently these aren’t anti-evil curls, but good-luck curls instead. If you happen to catch sight of them, they’ll bring you good luck, you know?

## CHAPTER 124

---

I think Wakaba-chan read my letter. When I was walking down the hallway she stepped out of the way and bowed to me.

Personally I didn't really like the idea of her bowing to me but it demonstrated that she was willing to accede to the President's wishes. Hopefully this would make things easier on her.

Mao-chan told me that Yukino-kun had fallen ill because of all the rain. Oh my god! The poor boy!

I hoped he was okay. They did say that he had a weak constitution.

Just remembering the little angel call me 'Reika-oneesan' was making my chest hurt now...

Enjou was in the salon so I called out to him on impulse.

"Ummm, Enjou-sama, is it true that Yukino-kun is feeling ill...?"

"Hm? You heard about that fast. Yeah. We had him admitted into hospital because of his asthma."

"Eh!? Hospital!?"

It was that bad!? I thought he was just resting in bed, but now...

I grimaced as I imagined him suffering in hospital.

"Oh, it's not that big of a deal, okay? It happens every year around this time. We're just having him stay in the hospital in case."

"But if it warrants a hospital admittance then is that not quite bad already?"

"Well, not exactly? It's just quicker to have responders if he's already in hospital. And

I think he's used to being admitted to hospital already."

"Ehh!?"

In both my lives not once had I ever been sick enough to go to the hospital. I'd never ridden an ambulance either. Going to the hospital felt really serious to me.

Yukino-kun...

"It's fine. My brother himself is just feeling bored from lying around in bed all the time. I visit him every day after school and it's always complaints from him."

"I see..."

He was only six still. It must have been incredibly lonely and discouraging to be separated from his home and family like that...

And hospitals had to be really scary at night... I hoped he wasn't crying.

"Enjou-sama! If that is the case then should you not be heading there right now instead of wasting time drinking tea? He must be so lonely!"

"There's no need to rush. He's used to it already, so it's fine."

"How cold!"

How could it be fine for a child to be hospitalised so often he was used to it.

"Right now Yukino-kun must be staring out of his rainy window, waiting silently for his oniisama to visit him. *'Is Oniisama coming yet? It's so lonely...'* Uuu, Yukino-kun...!"

Once I imagined it in my head I just...

"I'm pretty sure he's watching a DVD or playing a game right now."

"..."

"Haha! Sorry. Anyway, you really don't have to worry so much. Today I'm going there with Masaya so we'll be heading out the moment he's here."

“Goodness. Kaburagi-sama is going as well?”

Yukino-kun must have been happy to be getting more visitors. He did mention something about Kaburagi making a snowman for him, didn't he. What on earth was he doing anyway. Hurry up already, Kaburagi! Yukino-kun is waiting, you know!

“Kaburagi-sama is taking a while. I wonder what his class is doing.”

I couldn't help but begin tapping my foot.

“Well, I think he should be here soon... See? Speak of the devil.”

Kaburagi opened the door to the salon. About time!

“Shuusuke- Huh. What are you frowning about?” he asked me in confusion.

*What was I frowning about?*

“Kisshouin-san here has been getting annoyed at how slow you were. Right, Kisshouin-san?”

“Annoyed at me? Did she need something with me?”

“No, I did not. More importantly, I think you should hurry along. Visiting hours might be ending soon.”

“Huh?”

Get a move on! If you don't...

“Kaburagi-samaaa! How about having some tea with us?”

See!? The President and her friends saw you already! Don't sit! Don't tarry!

Guohhhgh! Yukino-kun is waiting, damn you! Damn you!

I got the feeling that Enjou was giving a knowing smile to my side.

The next day I prepared a get-well gift for Yukino-kun. I remember that in my old life, once when I was sick with the cold my older cousin came to visit me. He gave me a fairy tale book as well as a letter written on a sheet with a cute snowman picture on it.

Anyhow, I was trying to get Enjou alone so that nobody would get weird misunderstandings about this but I was having a lot of trouble with it.

It wasn't until after school that he was alone and heading to the car park that I caught him.

"Enjou-sama!"

"Kisshouin-san?"

It was showering faintly but I couldn't be bothered with the umbrella and just ran over. Enjou covered me with his one.

"What's up?"

"Could you please hand this to Yukino-kun?"

I held out a ribboned cloth parcel to him.

"What's this?"

"A book. I thought it might help with his boredom."

"Oh? Well thanks. Can I ask what kind of book?"

"Das Wirtshaus im Spessart. A fairy tale that I enjoyed as a child."

"Fairy tale?"

"Yes. Eh!? Could it be that Yukino-kun does not enjoy fairy tales?"

Oh no! Had he already grown out of them by Year 1!?

"No, that's not it. He loves books, so I'm sure he'll appreciate it. Thanks for this," he smiled after calming me down.

Was he lying...?

“Anyway, I’ll make sure he gets this.”

“Thank you. I apologise for holding you, Enjou-sama. I shall take my leave. Gokigen’yoh.”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow. Oh, and take this umbrella.”

“No need. It is but a short run away. Goodbye!”

I began running back to the school building.

Oh. Even though I told Wakaba-chan not to run, here I was as a Pivoine running with all my might... Nobody was looking, right?

Two days later I got a letter back from Yukino-kun.

“Thanks for the book and the letter, Reika-oneesan. The book was really interesting. It was so interesting that I stayed up reading it and then had a fit and they had to give me emergency treatment. Just kidding. Did I scare you?

My favourite story was Das kalte Herz. Which did you like the most? Tell me all about it when I’m back at school.

I go to the hospital a lot so I’m fine. The other day Masaya-niisama came by and we played games together. When we were done, Masaya-niisama gave me a DVD for a zombie movie but I’ve been too scared to watch it. What should I do...

– Yukino’

*Kaburagiiiiiiiiiii!*

## CHAPTER 125

---

Enjou told me that Yukino-kun had been discharged so I immediately went to the Petite salon to visit him.

“Yukino-kun! Welcome back!”

“Reika-oneesan!”

He greeted me with the smile of an angel but I noticed that he was a little thinner than the last time I saw him. Maybe he wasn’t all better yet. Was it okay for him to come to school?

Unaware of my worries, he stood up from the couch and trotted over to my side.

“Ahh! You should stay seated, Yukino-kun!”

“Ehh~ I can at least stand, you know?”

“No, no, you only just left the hospital. Come now, sit.”

“Okayyy.”

It was a relief that he did as I asked.

“You were unwell recently, so you must avoid pushing yourself.”

“But I’m not pushing myself. I’m fine.”

“But...”

“I’m really fine. But thanks for worrying, Reika-oneesan.”

Uuu... If he smiles at me like that I can’t really keep nagging him. But he’s really okay, right?

Sitting beside me, Yukino-kun was enjoying warm black tea.

“Oh, that reminds me! Thank you so much for the book. It was really interesting.”

“Really? Thank goodness. Your oniisama told me that you were feeling bored so I wondered how I could help with that.”

“Yeah. It was so interesting I read it twice.”

“I am glad that you enjoyed it. ...Was it rough living in the hospital?”

“No, it was just like usual.”

“Like usual... How many times have you been hospitalised?”

“Ehh~ I don’t really remember... How many times *has* it been?”

Eh!? He’s been in hospital more times than he can remember!?

“I’ve always gone to the hospital whenever I have a bad attack. But there are lots of kids my age there, so it’s fun, you know? And the doctor puts on a Santa costume during Christmas and we have a party.”

“Eh!? You’ve been to hospital during Christmas as well!?”

“Yes, just the once though.”

No! Christmas should be one of the most important days for a child!

To think that he was forced to spend his Christmas in the hospital instead of having fun with his family at home... Here I was, living happily and thoughtlessly while somebody his age was suffering. It made me feel kind of guilty...

“Don’t look like that, Reika-oneesan. My family came to visit me and gave me lots of presents. And last year I was feeling better so I celebrated at home too.”

“I see. Then you enjoyed yourself with all of your family last Christmas?”

“Yes. Ah, but Niisama wasn’t there.”

“My! And after you were finally at home to celebrate too!”



Damn that Enjou. How could he leave his cute little brother like that. I bet a popular guy like him was on a date with some girl. A little harem world where he was waited on hand and foot by all of his little followers. What an unbelievable guy. Unforgivable. Going on harem dates while I spent every Christmas single...

“Niisama went with Masaya-niisama to the Sea of Japan. He brought back crabs as a souvenir, you know? I heard that because of the blizzard the sea was really dark and stormy.”

“...”

...Sorry for the misunderstanding, Enjou. You had an even rougher Christmas than I did, didn't you... A Christmas, spent with another guy, at the Sea of Japan, in the middle of a snowstorm. And with that other guy completely unresponsive because of heartbreak. I bet you had to experience it yourself to really understand that kind of suffering...

“Still, I had no idea that you were so ill that you had to be repeatedly hospitalised... The treatment must be rough.”

“It's just inhalers and an IV, so it's fine.”

“So they give you an IV as well...”

Given that my health was one of my few redeeming features, I had never used an IV before. It sounded so scary, having a needle stuck in your arm the whole time... I'd always been afraid of needles...

“Actually this time they couldn't use the vein in my arm so they used the back of my hand instead. See?”

“Eh-, the back of your hand!?”

He showed me the red mark on the back of his hand. They stabbed his hand for this!? Just looking at it was painful!

“It doesn't hurt that much, you know? What really hurt was when they used the back of my foot. Just once was enough.”

“Foot!?”

There was almost no flesh there! Uooohhhh! Painful!

Why did Yukino-kun who was as cute as an angel have to keep suffering these things!

“Yukino-kun! If there is anything I can do to help, let me know!”

“Thanks, Reika-oneesan!”

I’m serious, you know? I’m kind of useless but for you I’ll do anything, you know?

After that he told me about how he liked animals but couldn’t keep one because of his asthma, so I showed him the pictures of Bea-tan that Umewaka-kun sent me. He found her cute and lit up. All of the affection her owner gave her wasn’t just for show. Her hair was definitely glossy and cute. That owner on the other hand...

Yukino-kun said that he liked cats too, so I decided to ask Ichinokura-san for photos next time.

This year the Handicrafts Club had a boy member join. His name was Minami-kun and he was really good at it. Particularly his embroidery. Thanks to that we were hoping for a lot out of him for the wedding dress we were making for the school festival this year.

And it was Minami-kun that I spotted being teased by other boys in the hallway leading to our clubroom.

“Minami, I heard you entered the Handicrafts Club?”

“Are you a tranny or something?”

“So you knit and stuff? Holy shit, you’re a loser!”

Minami-kun was a quiet type, so he was standing stock and bearing it. Ah. They poked him.

“Oi, Minami, show us what you’re making!”

“Stop it!”

They were trying to snatch his bag from him now. This wouldn't do.

"What might you all be doing?" I asked.

All of them turned my way at once.

"Who are you supposed to be?"

"You dumbass! That's the 2nd year Kisshouin Reika...-san! From the Pivoine!"

"Eh-, the Pivoine!?"

"Minami-kun is a member of my club. Did you need something?"

I walked up to them, making sure my Pivoine badge flashed in the light, but the boys picking on Minami-kun flinched and backed away.

"Ummm..."

"Um, we were just..."

They looked at each other for help.

"Just now I think I heard you make light of the Handicrafts Club. Was it my imagination?"

"Eh!?"

They stiffened.

"No, we didn't mean it like that... Right?"

"Yeah," one agreed.

"Yes..." agreed another.

"Oh?" I asked, "Minami-kun is somebody very important to my club. Please do not forget that if you come up with any strange ideas about Minami-kun then you can consider having made an enemy of me. All right?"

I flashed a bright smile to finish it off.

The boys who had been teasing Minami-kun all gave very acceptable responses before hurrying off. Goodness, you shouldn't run in the hallways, you know?

"Umm! Kisshouin-senpai, thank you very much!" bowed Minami-kun.

"It was no problem at all. Protecting my kouhai is my job as a member of the club. If anything happens again, do tell me. Now come. Shall we head to the club?"

"Yes!!" he nodded energetically.

As if I could allow one of our key strategic resources to run off because of some idiots. I couldn't do embroidery at all.

With his bag held tightly in both hands, Minami-kun half-ran after me.

I heard that the next day Ririna declared to him,

"Well, if you're Reika-san's kouhai then I guess I have no choice but to protect you too."

Wasn't he basically invincible amongst his peers now?

## CHAPTER 126

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I continued to eat out with Ichinokura-san and Mao-chan each week.

Ichinokura-san really did seem to love food. The other day when I told him I felt like xiaolongbao, he replied,

“I know the best place. I’ll take you.”

It seems that he meant it because that weekend we ended up in Taiwan.

After leaving the airport we headed directly to the restaurant where they brought out xiaolongbao in those stacked bamboo steamer things, so we ate and ate.



*Xiaolongbao is a type of steamed bun, traditionally filled with pork.  
One popular and common variant is pork with minced crab meat and roe.*

At first I had wondered if there was any need to go to Taiwan just to eat xiaolongbao but by the end of it I was convinced. This was definitely the best xiaolongbao I had ever had. When I heard about red bean xiaolongbao I thought it was some mistake, but when I tried them they were delicious too.

Besides the xiaolongbao we also had steamed jiaozi and siu mai and stuff. By the end of it I was so full I could burst.

After that we went and bought some tea as a souvenir. Some Jasmine tea, as well as this other tea whose name caught my attention. Dongfang Meiren (Oriental Beauty). It was advertised as being good for weight loss, so I ended up buying it too. If possible I

would definitely be onboard with burning away all that I ate today. I was so full that it felt like my stomach would burst.

I also bought a tea set with a cute drawing of a pigtailed girl. Drinking from this would probably be fun. It gave the right atmosphere.

There was apparently something popular with women around so I had a look and found a flower blooming in boiled water. It was flowering tea. I bought it without a thought. I could gift this to Mao-chan.

We never went to a single sightseeing location during our blitz tour. All we did was eat xiaolongbao and then come back from Taiwan. It showed me just how seriously Ichinokura-san took food.

But it was fun, even if all we did was eat. I wanted to go there again with somebody else, this time for longer. The problem was that I didn't have somebody to invite... I'd rather not go alone.

When I got home I excitedly tried some of the flowering tea. But when I poured the hot water in, it turned out kind of gross. Like a bundle of caterpillar fungus... Sorry, Mao-chan.

I hated how it rained every day.

Feeling a bit gloomy, I opened the door to the salon to Kaburagi playing Chopin's Raindrop.

The people in the salon were enchanted. It wasn't often that he'd play the piano here but sometimes he'd feel like it and show us just how skilled he was in music.

Before I realised it I was drawn in as well. Just standing there and listening. I even unknowingly swayed my body to it.

When he was done, everybody broke into applause. Myself included, of course. He was *really* good. My mood seemed to have lifted as well. Maybe had I come earlier I could have heard the start too. What a shame.

"That was a wonderful performance, Kaburagi-sama!"

“Hearing you play ‘Raindrop’ makes me think that the rainy season might be a good thing.”

“Kaburagi-sama, could you not play us another song?”

The girls were already surrounding him.

I was just watching them blankly when Enjou came along.

“Since you’re already listening, how about a request, Kisshouin-san?” he said as he pushed me into the ring.

“Masaya, play a song that Kisshouin-san likes.”

“Eh!?”

I was startled. What on earth was he saying! I looked at him with wide eyes but he whispered,

“As thanks for Yukino.”

Hah?

Everybody was looking at me now. Kaburagi was looking at us suspiciously.

“We’re always in your care, Kisshouin-san. So any song, just name it.”

“Oi, who’s supposed to be playing this exactly?”

“Hm? Well you, Masaya,” smiled Enjou.

Everybody was already well aware that Kaburagi only played the piano when Kaburagi felt like it. He wouldn’t play just because you requested something. Wouldn’t this be shaming me if he said no!? Gahhhh!

“...What song?”

“Eh!?”

Kaburagi stared at me. Don’t tell me he was really going to play?!

I could already hear the girls sighing dreamily.

“Ummm...”

Oh no, oh no. I hadn't thought about what song to ask for so my eyes were swimming and I was completely panicked. Aah, stop looking at me!

Fine! Something upbeat then!

“Then, Chopin's Fantasie-Impromptu please.”

After saying it I realised it was a hard one so I was about to take it back, but Kaburagi looked up in thought for a moment and agreed.

“Got it.”

Eh!? Was he going to play without any rehearsal!? The Fantasie-Impromptu!?

Leaving me to my shock, Kaburagi stretched his fingers and then began to play with vigour.

Today I was having another outing with Mao-chan and Ichinokura-san. Although Yuuri-kun usually came, he wasn't here today.

“Will Yuuri-kun not be joining us today?” I asked.

Mao-chan puffed her cheeks out.

“I had a fight with Yuuri.”

“A fight? But you seem to get along so well.”

“Yuuri said to me, ‘Did you get fatter recently?’ Fatter!? Don't you think that was so mean? I don't need Yuuri anymore!”

Oh my god. Yuuri-kun!?

“How could he say that to a girl. He's the worst! Don't you think so, Reika-oneesama?”



“I suppose.”

Mao-chan was in a really bad mood. After being told that, I could see why she was hurt and angry.

Ichinokura-san was listening as well, so he consoled her.

“You aren’t fat at all, Mao. You’re still growing so you shouldn’t worry about these things. Actually, it makes you even cuter.”

“...Reika-oneesama, did I get fat?”

“Of course not! You are adorable, Mao-chan.”

But now that I looked closer, she did seem a little rounder than usual...

“It’s not cute when girls are all skin and bones. You’re always cute, Mao, so you shouldn’t worry.”

It took some effort but we finally cheered her up and went for some delicious dessert.

Asking if somebody got fat recently... Nobody had actually said that to me yet, but was I still okay...?

But then Ichinokura-san said that plump girls were cuter than ones that were skin and bones... So I was still fine, right?

Mao-chan and I ate our desserts with smiles.

## CHAPTER 127

# THE HANDICRAFTS CLUB'S SHOP BOY

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Because of my grandma's influence I've enjoyed handicrafts since I was young. Whenever winter came I would always begin to knit with her. Anything simple enough to make, I made. Whenever I finished something I could show it to everyone, and it really made me happy when they praised me for it.

My favourite had to be embroidery. Creating a complex design with nothing but thread took a lot of hard work. It was hard to describe just how fulfilling it was when I completed one.

But it wasn't long before I found out that boys were mocked for doing these things. I was teased quite a lot in primary and middle school because of it. I didn't join the Home Economics Club in middle school for that reason. I figured that I could just do it at home.

I hadn't planned to change my mind in high school either. But Suiran was my first choice and I went to their school festival to scout it out. The moment I laid eyes on the wedding dress centrepiece for the Handicrafts Club, my heart was stolen.

I heard from others that the club had worked together to create it. I wondered if I could make something like that too if I joined...

After desperate study, I managed to get accepted. It was overwhelming just how incredible the facilities were compared to any other school I knew.

In my middle school I had been one of the more well-off students, but the wealth of the Internal Students was a different order of magnitude. And the students called the Pivoine were simply beyond comparison.

I had heard stories about them before entering. About how not only were they wealthy, but they held the power at school. There was a room called the Salon that was exclusive to them, and it was unthinkable to cross them because they could do anything they wanted without consequence. According to the rumours, if you angered one they could torment you until you dropped out of school... It was frightening. My own grade supposedly held ten of them. I realised that I had to avoid their attention

or else...

Despite the trouble I had adjusting to a new school, I was ready to visit the club that I longed for.

Completely as expected, the club was nothing but girls. I wasn't sure what to do, and considered giving up on it after all.

But the new model of embroidery machine had gotten hold of me. I was a firm believer of manual embroidery but I wanted to try all of it! The weaving machine seemed like fun!

I happily listened to all the senpai speak about handicrafts. I would probably be made fun of again, but I really wanted to join.

At some point I noticed a row of torso mannequins in the back of the room. By chance I caught sight of a full mannequin wearing our uniform.

My curiosity drew me over. What lay beyond was an intricately made life-sized doll of a girl with ringlets. Or so I thought but she was alive! She was a human! Eh? Why on earth was she sitting there, I wondered.

The girl didn't notice me and never lifted her head. Upon closer inspection I realised that she was absorbed with stabbing something with a needle. Eh... A voodoo spell...?

She seemed like a dangerous person... I wondered if this club was actually suspicious...

While I was stuck watching with my heart thumping in my chest, somebody called me from behind. I couldn't help but let out a small shriek.

"Is something wrong?" the Club President had whispered.

"Umm... Who is that person?" I whispered back.

For a moment I saw her eyes swim.

"That's a member of our club from 2nd Year."

...I fearfully asked just one more question.

“Just... what is she doing?”

Black magic?

We were talking right beside her, but Ringlets-senpai was completely engrossed in her work. Actually it was like she couldn't hear us at all, and continued stabbing obsessively at the figure in her hand.

“Ohh. We call that needle felting. It's a crafts technique that's been pretty popular recently. You stab wool with a needle to create shapes out of it.”

So that's what she was doing. I had no idea.

“Reika-sama.”

Reika-sama?

The President had moved one of the torsos out of the way, and called out to Ringlets-senpai who looked up at us in blank bemusement.

She had the face of a doll as well.

“This is a 1st year who's come to see our club. I think he's interested in your needle felting, Reika-sama.”

Suddenly, Ringlets-senpai's face lit up.

“This is needle felting, where you use a needle to make things. It is simple and fun, you know? This is the red panda I am making. Look!”

She held out the figure in one hand to show me, but instead of looking like a red panda on two legs, it really just looked like a voodoo doll to me...

But she told me “Please do join our club!” and her smile was so bright and happy that I couldn't help but smile back.

“Reika-sama might seem unapproachable at first, but once you talk to her you'll realise that she's very kind and loves handicrafts a lot. You won't have to worry, all right?”

“Yes.”

The club had a rather odd senpai in it, but the club members seemed to freely enjoy themselves which is why I made up my mind to join.

Never would I have imagined that the funny senpai I met was actually a member of the Pivoine, and one of the most powerful people in 2nd Year—

Not long after the term began, Kisshouin Reika-senpai became well-known amongst my grade as well.

There were a number of famous senpai at our school, and the most famous amongst them was the Emperor, Kaburagi Masaya-senpai. The first time I saw him I was overawed by his presence and charisma. Amazing, I thought. This person who people called an emperor was like a different existence to me. He brought the words ‘ruler’ and ‘conqueror’ came to mind.

Kisshouin Reika-senpai was included amongst those celebrities. She was the daughter of the Kisshouin family, and was the leader of the largest faction of 2nd year girls. It was said that if Kaburagi-senpai was an emperor, then Kisshouin-senpai was an empress.

When I heard that story I finally realised what an outrageous person I had gotten entangled with, and couldn’t stop the shivers.

How could that have been a voodoo doll. There was no need for voodoo. If she wanted she could erase anybody she wanted with ease.

I didn’t know what to do. How could I have known that an unassuming club like the Handicrafts Club could have had a Pivoine member. And not just any Pivoine but the Empress of all people. People had told me that if a Pivoine ever bothered with a club, then the girls would almost always join the Flower Arrangement Club or the Tea Ceremony Club...

After realising the truth I was terrified for a while. But despite my apprehensions, Kisshouin-senpai always attended the club with passion, and was always enthusiastic about participating. She might have been clearly different to everybody else there, but she seemed strangely at home to me.

“Your embroidery is amazing, Minami-kun. I already know you will shine during the school festival,” Kisshouin-senpai smiled brightly at me like always.

Thanks to that, before I knew it I was replying to her normally. When I mentioned that I was thinking of embroidering a tapestry for the school festival she praised me and cheered me on. I asked her what she was planning on doing, but her expression turned troubled and she told me,

“Actually, I might really like handicrafts but admittedly I am not very good at them...”

“What’s your favourite technique?” I asked, and it was, as expected, needle felting.

I asked her why she couldn’t just go with that then but she was worried that it would look pathetic next to the rest.

Hmm...

“Then why not use needle felting to make something wonderful that you can be proud of?” I asked.

I held out my hands and gestured something large enough to hold in both arms.

Senpai’s face immediately lit up.

“I shall go discuss this with the Club President at once!”

With that, she flew off.

...She might have been a member of the Pivoine, but Kisshouin-senpai really wasn’t scary at all, was she.

At least that was what I thought. One day I was being harassed by boys from my class, and was being mocked for enjoying handicrafts again. They had done this a lot since finding out what club I had joined. I spent each day nervous that it would finally escalate into bullying.

I had hoped that I could just endure it. But when they snatched the bag with my tapestry in it I couldn’t bear with it any longer.

It was at that moment that Kisshouin-senpai appeared.

She was like a different person to the senpai who attended club activities with a carefree smile. Kisshouin-senpai confronted my classmates head-on, and gave them a

terrifying warning with a smile. Panicked by the appearance of a big-shot from the Pivoine, my classmates ran with their tails between their legs.

I was really happy when she said that I was important to her.

And just a moment ago she had the same aura of a ruler that the Emperor did. It was so cool.

I decided that until she graduated I would follow her all the way!

When we entered the classroom, senpai had transformed into her usual self completely.

With a new pair of men's socks in her hand, she said to me,

"I want to embroider a tanuki on these, so could you please help?"

Why tanuki on socks, I wondered, and asked her as much.

"To harass a lying tanuki," she replied.

After I taught her how to do it, she muttered,

"None of the socks will escape..." as she began embroidering some mysterious creature onto it.

I supposed that a commoner like me would never understand the taste of a noble...

The next day I was summoned by Kotou-san from the class next door. Kotou-san was a famous External Student who entered during middle school. Despite that she was bold and unrestrained, and back when she made an enemy out of scores of Internal Students she shot back,

"Not only do you second-rates have worse marks than me, but you have less money as well! A half-baked rabble like you have no grounds to complain!"

At the end of it all she even formed her own faction. She was scary. And I had no clue why she had called me out...

While I was standing there filled with anxiety, Kotou-san raised her chin haughtily and declared with equal arrogance,

“Well, if you’re Reika-san’s kouhai then I guess I have no choice but to protect you too. If anybody bothers you, report to me. I’ll crush them!”

Surprised, I asked her why she was doing this only to find out that shockingly, Kisshouin-senpai was her cousin. I commented that they must have gotten along well, but she denied it and yelled at me instead.

With Kisshouin-senpai and Kotou-san behind me, the boys in my class had all gone quiet.

Speaking of Kotou-san, although she was wilful and had a strong ego, she was the type to protect her own. Thanks to that, she had a lot of companions, both boys and girls. Now it looked like I was set to be one as well.

One day she gave me an order.

“Reika-san has been getting fat recently. Shop Boy. Go and let her know that she’s getting fat.”

Naturally there was no way I could say that!

I flat-out refused, but instead she replied,

“Then I’ll go tell her!”

before trying to rush out of the classroom.

“Noooo! Please don’t!” screamed a number of my classmates. Somehow they succeeded in stopping her but now Kotou-san was pouting.

“But Reika-san...” she sulked.

She really did love Senpai, didn’t she?

Anyhow, I wasn’t exactly happy about it but she gave me the nickname ‘Shop Boy’.

It had all begun with this.



“So your name is Minami Raita? Then it’s Minarai(Apprentice) for short, isn’t it. From today on you’re Apprentice.”

I told her that I didn’t want a nickname like that.

“Oh. Then since you’re an apprentice, Shop Boy it is.”

That was how I was stuck with something even worse... Urgh...

But oddly enough, it seemed like people started talking to me more after I turned into ‘Shop Boy’.

Because I had Senpai and Kotou-san, nobody used me as a gopher even though I was a Shop Boy, and everybody remembered me now too.

I guess in that sense being a Shop Boy wasn’t so bad then...?

My new friend, who was oddly well-informed, told me a rumour. Apparently the Emperor had given Kisshouin-senpai a love poem anthology, and had played her a song on the piano. Not only that but his best friend, Enjou-senpai, had shared an umbrella with her on the way home, and had gotten a gift too, and she was just living an incredibly splendid life. That was Kisshouin-senpai for you~

When I looked out the window I think I saw Senpai and her friends being attacked by a flock of pigeons. But I must have made a mistake. How could that have happened to Kisshouin-senpai?

The senpai in the Student Council often worried about Externals like us. The other day they told me,

“If you end up in trouble with any of the Internal Students, and particularly any of the Pivoine, please come and talk to us.”

I threw out my chest and replied,

“I have Kisshouin-senpai so I’ll be fine!”

## CHAPTER 128

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I was studying for my term end exams at night when I suddenly felt a little hungry. That's why I began eating some chocolate snacks made by a company named after the Rococo Queen's dynasty. Crunchy and delicious. They were light too, so I couldn't stop eating them. I hadn't skipped dinner or anything either.

Actually, lately I was starting to feel suspicious that whatever controlled fullness in my brain had gone haywire... I think maybe my stomach had gotten bigger after all the times with Ichinokura-san...

Still, you couldn't win a war on an empty stomach. Although nobody had noticed, I had still gotten rank 29 last time. I fully intended to hold the line. Even as my hands provided supplies to my brain, I was memorising and memorising.

It was all part of my plan. I had heard that after memorising you could move it into long-term memory by sleeping. That's why I went to bed fully expecting success so why was it that after I woke up everything was gone!? What was the meaning of this!?

Far from 'long-term memory' I had to painstakingly re-memorise almost half of everything I did last night. I couldn't go on. It was going to be a failure for me... Aahh, just how on earth did Wakaba-chan study? I really wanted to know.

I thought that maybe better blood circulation to my brain would help with memorising so I got in the bath and tried to remember the timeline for my history course but then I just got dizzy and things got even worse.

Do your best, Reika!

Anyhow, I studied, the exams came, and then I did the exams. The result was me at rank 30. Uohhh! I just managed to stay on the ranking boards by the skin of my teeth, but I did it!

"Goodness! Reika-sama, you're rank 30!"

"You're amazing, Reika-sama!"

This time, the girls around me noticed. I was so happy...! But I couldn't exactly show it.

"Oh. So I am, hohoho," I laughed, pretending like I didn't care.

Little did they know that I had actually studied half to death for that result. And they never would.

"As expected of you, Reika-sama!"

Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan kept praising me, so I said,

"Thank you. But in truth I actually dropped in rankings, you know? I could not quite find the time to study this time around..." casually emphasizing my previous achievement.

"Truly!?"

"Dropped *to* 30th place? You really *are* different to us, Reika-sama!"

"To think that you made 30th place without studying!"

The praise came more and more.

I was so happy that I started to smirk, so I had to quickly cover my mouth with my hand.

"I think that will do, everyone. My results were nothing special. Kaburagi-sama and the others are the ones we should be praising, no?"

I changed the subject because they were praising me so much it started to sound like sarcasm.

"Oh, you're right! As expected of the Emperor of Suiran!"

This time Kaburagi had made a comeback and reclaimed his spot in 1st place. Not only that but Enjou was 2nd place. Wakaba-chan was 3rd.

With Kaburagi and Enjou in 1st and 2nd place, unlike last time everybody was celebrating instead. 'Did you see that!? That's the power of our representative!' was

the feeling they gave.

Wakaba-chan was staring at the board with her mouth hanging open. Some girls who didn't like her started talking about how it was just a fluke last time.

"It's Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama!"

Like Moses parting the ocean, the crowd moved out of the way as they came. Everybody watched as they looked at the board. Oh, for a moment one side of Kaburagi's mouth twitched upwards.

"Kaburagi-sama, congratulations on 1st place!"

"You're amazing, Enjou-sama!"

Enjou smiled and gave his thanks amongst the storm of praise, while Kaburagi acted as though his result were natural.

Somebody said "As if he could lose to the likes of Takamichi-san," which caused him to look her way.

With a smile, he approached her.

"Ah well. Do your best next time," he said, giving her a pat on the shoulder, before leaving magnificently together with Enjou.

Left behind, Wakaba-chan was now suffering from some inexplicable jealousy at being pat on the shoulder...

Kaburagi really hated losing.

Kaburagi, I bet you studied your butt off this time, didn't you.

Since the exams were over, Ichinokura-san invited me out to celebrate. And this time he said there was somebody he wanted to introduce. Apparently it was his lover!

Apparently Mao-chan had no idea about 'Haruto-niisama's lover' so it came as quite a shock to her. When I went to visit her in the Petite salon she was looking a little down.

And Yuuri was absent from her side again. Apparently he had asked if she had gotten even fatter.

“I had no idea that Haruto-niisama had a girlfriend...”

“Yes, it was my first time hearing it too.”

To Mao-chan, it must have felt like her beloved Oniisama was being taken away. She seemed lonely, so I wrapped my arm behind her and patted her on the shoulder.

If Oniisama was taken away by a lover, would it be a shock to me as well...?

“I wanted Haruto-niisama to date you, Reika-oneesama...”

“Eh!?”

That was... I mean, there was quite an age difference. Ichinokura-san was 26 now, wasn't it? Dating me would be a crime, you know?

He used some killer words back at the flower viewing party so my heart had throbbed a little, but once we got to know each other better he was more like my foodie comrade. And he said that it was fun eating with somebody else who really enjoyed their food. He was really relaxing and soothing to be around, and was comfortable in a different way to Oniisama. Even if he had a girlfriend, I hoped our relationship could continue. There was nobody else whose taste in foods meshed this well, after all.

“Mao-chan, Ichinokura-san's happiness is important, yes? Should you not be happy for him?”

“...Yes.”

She gave a little nod.

“I wonder what kind of person she is. Ichinokura-san chose her after all. She must be wonderful.”

“I think she must be somebody who loves eating with Haruto-niisama!” said Mao-chan with a smile.

It looked like she was feeling better now. And mmn, I agreed. I could see somebody

touring restaurants with him.

“She must be somebody plump the way Haruto-niisama likes.”

“I think I agree.”

Since it was Ichinokura-san’s girlfriend, she had to be a huge eater.

“I find myself looking forward to this weekend.”

Mao-chan and I nodded to each other with a smile.

That weekend, Mao-chan and I met his girlfriend in the early afternoon. She was slender and dainty like a model.

*Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?*

## CHAPTER 129

---

“She was my classmate in university. This is Yumiyama Erika-san.”

“Hello.”

Smiling besides Ichinokura-san, Yumiyama Erika-san was slender like a model. Actually not ‘like’. I had seen her in fashion magazines before. She was literally a model.

“What are you having, Erika?”

“I’ll just go with a salad. I have a photo shoot soon.”

Mao-chan and I had arrived earlier and already ordered, so sitting in front of us now were countless plates.

Mao-chan looked at her own orders, and then looked at Erika-san’s salad.

We couldn’t exactly waste food that we ordered either, so in front of Erika-san and her tiny salad, Mao-chan and I were forced to awkwardly eat our usual fill of calories.

“I’ve heard so much about you two from Haruto,” she smiled. “He’s always talking about how cute his niece and her friend are. And gosh was he right! You really are as cute as a doll~!”

She clapped her hands together in happiness.

“Didn’t I tell you? Mao and Reika-san are like adorable little sisters. Just going out to eat with them is enough to do away with all my stress.”

Ichinokura-san flashed a smile beside her.

“You’re such a gourmand, Haruto~” she replied. “Actually, I’ve known about Mao for quite a while now, but recently he began telling me about you as well, Reika-san, and I just had to meet you.”

I was startled.

“Umm, I apologise for always going out to eat with him. I had no idea he was taken, and did not mean anything by it... If I upset you in any way, I will make up for it.”

Uh oh. Don't tell me she had to meet me to stop taking her boyfriend out to play?!

We weren't playing though. We were eating.

Ah! Didn't we go to Taiwan the other day!? Although to be honest it was a one-day trip so you couldn't really call it going on vacation with somebody.

But still! Don't tell me I was in the position of some housewrecker!? Aahh! Reika! Didn't you learn anything after that time with Kasumi-sama!?

*'Adultery'...*

*'Demanding reparations'...*

“No! I didn't mean it like *that*! You didn't do anything to upset me at all!” she exclaimed as she waved her hands in denial. “Actually, I'm really happy that he finally has somebody to eat with, you know?”

...Really?

“You know how much Haruto loves food, don't you? I've been trying to eat out with him as much as I can, but I just can't. But then recently I heard that you and Mao were going places with him and I was just so relieved. Haruto always tells me how much he enjoys his meals with you two, you know?”

I put on a smile and nodded along.

“You're just a small eater, Erika,” said Ichinokura-san, “You don't have to force yourself to come with me. And Reika-san, when I first met you you wouldn't even touch the food. I was really worried, you know? But thankfully when we met again at Mao's birthday I found you happily eating away. Erika has never eaten much, and now her job needs it too, but you two are still growing so you need to eat. Oh, what should we get for dessert?”

With that, Ichinokura-san showed the dessert menu to the two of us, even after all of the food—



We talked about how they first met, or about Erika-san's modelling job, and to be honest it was a nice enough lunch. And there had been no need for me to worry about Taiwan either, because Erika-san had said to me with a smile, "It must have been tiring going to Taiwan. I'm glad the xiaolongbao were good. I've been drinking the tea Haruto got me every day."

Ichinokura-san spoke.

"Now then, what shall we do? Erika wanted to go with you wherever you two wanted."

"Yes. How about shopping? I could get you two clothes that would look good on you. Oh, or did you want to go eat something else?"

Mao-chan and I made eye contact.

"No, I am afraid I must be excusing myself. I would not want to disturb you on your date."

"Me too! I'm full so I'm going to go home now!"

"Eh? You don't have to worry about that," said Ichinokura-san.

"Yeah! We only just met too, and you're leaving already?" agreed Erika-san.

"I simply cannot accept disturbing you two further," I said cheerfully.

"You're right, Reika-oneesama. Haruto-niisama, you're the one who shouldn't be holding back. Go enjoy your date!" smiled Mao-chan.

The two of them gave slightly troubled smiles at our teasing.

"Then at least let us send you off," he said.

"No need. My family will send a car. Please, go on."

"Reika-oneesama, in that case could you drop me off too?"

"Of course, Mao-chan."

“Hmm... Is this really okay?” he asked.

‘It is, it is’ the two of us cheerfully reassured him.

“We’ll definitely meet again right?” asked Erika-san, “Mao-chan, I’d be really happy if you called me ‘oneesan’ too.”

Mao smiled at her bashfully.

And so the two of us saw the couple off with a smile before silently walking in the other direction.

“...Mao-chan, shall we go somewhere?”

“...Yes”

The two of us entered a nearby café and ordered something sweet to drink.

“What the heck was that! Haruto-niisama’s girlfriend was *exactly* skin and bones!” exploded Mao-chan.

“She was a model after all...”

“Unbelievable! He kept saying over and over that plump girls were better than skinny ones and then he chooses a skinny model!? What’s wrong with him!”

Mao-chan was clenching her fists in rage.

I thought it was unbelievable too. Erika-san’s legs were as skinny as my upper arm. Were her legs too skinny, or were my arms too thick...

“She truly ate nothing but salad, it seems.”

Even though Ichinokura-san had completely denounced diets to the two of us...

“Right!? We ate so much but she was the only one eating just a salad! It was like she was laughing at us for eating so much!”

Mm...

“I was sure that the person Haruto-niisama chose would be a plump girl who loved food and was good at cooking. But instead she was a dieter who ate nothing but *salad!*”

Mao-chan’s cheeks were turning red from rage.

I silently drank my banana au lait.

Mao-chan was hanging her head when she muttered.

“...I’ve gotten fat.”

“Eh!?”

“You and Haruto-niisama said I wasn’t but I’ve been thinking about what Yuuri-kun said... I got on the scales and they said I was fatter. But Okaasama said I didn’t look fat at all, so I thought that maybe I was still okay...”

Are you actually me, Mao-chan?

“Yuuri-kun was right... Haruto-niisama is a big fat liar!”

Mao-chan looked bitter and frustrated.

“I see... I guess I got fat too...”

“Reika-oneesama!”

Mao-chan looked at me in shock.

“I have somewhat noticed it as well. That my weight has increased recently. But I turned away from reality.”

“No, Oneesama! You don’t look fat at all, Oneesama!”

“No. I look like a pear under this...”

“...!”

Mao-chan and I held each others’ hands tightly.

Looking around, all of the girlfriends in the café had tiny cakes, and they used forks to make even tinier bites to eat from. Every one of them without exception was cute and skinny. Nobody ate more than two or three bites.

I was fooled by Alice's owner's sweet words, and before I knew it I had transformed into Humpty Dumpty...

When I got home, a happy tanuki came over.

"Reika! Otousama bought you your favourite cakes, so come eat with me!"

I glared at him and returned to my room.

*Hate...!* I hated all the men in this world...! Liars! Liars! *Liars!*

They spouted lies about men liking plumper girls but in the end they always chose the skinny ones! What they said and what they thought were complete opposites!

They said they liked girls who could eat a lot but in their hearts they were laughing at us! That was the truth!

"Nuooooooooohhhhhh!!!"

I vented all of my hatred and frustration into my needle felt. Stab! Stab stab stab!

Elohim, Essaim! Elohim, Essaim!

"Uohhhhhhhh!!!"

My roar filled the Kisshouin house.

A pox on all the lying men in the world!

## CHAPTER 130

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—It appears that for a moment I may have lost myself...

How scary. I hope that was not possession.

Thank goodness I regained my sanity before delving into the world of onmyou and dark magic.

Now then. If I wanted to look reality in the eyes, then I needed a suitable advisor.

When I left the room for some reason Otousama was standing silently *right* outside my door. Scary! What was he trying to accomplish by standing outside his daughter's room like this.

"Did you need something, Otousama?"

"...Reika-chan, did something happen? You can talk to Otousama about it. Otousama would do anything for you, you know? Come! Voice your worries to me!"

"Hah?"

What was all this, all of a sudden? Was he in shock because I rejected those cakes?

I didn't quite understand but right now I was busy, so sorry, but I rejected him and headed for the living room. The tanuki called "Reika~ Reika~" from behind me. Ugh, that was actually really scary... Wasn't Otousama the one with worries here?

Okaasama was drinking tea in the living room.

"Reika-san, please be quiet indoors. I heard something like a wild animal."

"Ah, my apologies."

So they heard the scream of my soul.

Is that why Otousama was trying to peep on me? In that case sorry. Don't worry. I just accidentally tapped into my demonic side for a bit.

I sat down besides Okaasama.

"Say, Okaasama. Have I gotten fatter?"

Having thought about it for a while, I realised the only person I could ask in this household was Okaasama. Otousama was sweet on me and he was tubby himself, so no way would he call me fat. Oniisama on the other hand was a gentleman, so he definitely wouldn't be clear with me either. In the end I could only ask a fellow woman like Okaasama if I wanted it to be given to me straight.

When Okaasama heard my words, her eyes widened. Then after a moment, she nodded quietly. I knew it!

"So you've noticed as well, Reika-san..."

"Okaasama! Why did you not tell me earlier!"

Isn't a parent supposed to be strict sometimes for their children's sake!?

"I'm sorry. Okaasama just couldn't say it..."

"Okaasama..."

I suppose as the mother to a girl at a delicate age, there were just some things hard to say.

"When did you notice, Okaasama?"

"Let's see. I suppose for one or two months now..."

"I see..."

The other day we went to a hotel lunch buffet at Mao-chan's request too. I shouldn't have done something stupid like trying to conquer all of the desserts...

"But you know, Reika-san, I have some terrific news for you!"

Suddenly Okaasama looked really happy as she handed me an envelope.

I looked inside and there was a pamphlet for a detox course, run by the Kaburagi Group's hotel.

"This is..."

"Remember that fasting course we went on last year? They invited us this year too. But it's a detox instead this time. Apparently we'll go to health salons, eat macrobiotic foods, and exercise. So, Reika-san, come with Okaasama?"

"Okaasama..."

...Okaasama, this was premeditated wasn't it?

While I was getting fat, the reason you didn't say anything was because you wanted me to go on this course with you, wasn't it? It's because you didn't want to go by yourself, Okaasama!

You fiend! There was a real fiend in this room!

"To be blunt, I do not think I could burn off my fat with such a mild course."

I was annoyed at Okaasama, so I refused. For her own purposes, she sat by and watched her daughter grow fat.

Okaasama begged me in panic.

"Reika-san! Please, come with me? If you hadn't been there last year Okaasama wouldn't have been able to bear it. Please? Please, Reika-san!"

"No."

I turned my head away.

"Mrs. Kaburagi said she wanted you to come too. She told me during that last party. You'll come, won't you, Reika-san?"

"Ehhh~"

Now that she had brought up Kaburagi's mum there was even more reason to refuse. Okaasama started pointing out stuff in the brochures like 'developing a body that gains less fat' and 'natural-style cooking' and stuff but I was having none of it.

Irritated by my complete refusal, Okaasama changed her tune.

"Then are you saying you want to be this fat forever, Reika-san! It's summer! The season where you wear less clothing! Are you going to pass summer with that thick waist of yours!"

"Oww! Okaasama, that hurts!"

Okaasama was pulling at my midsection with both hands. Oww!

"You must come, Reika-san! I won't accept a refusal!"

She was getting angry at *me* now!? The *victim*!? People often said that guilty people would try to hide their sins with anger. Okaasama was the very picture of that.

Having lost to her intensity, I trudged back to my room. I didn't wanna go...

The spirit of my hatred was still lying around in my room, so I gave it a small pyre as a funeral.

On Monday morning I was putting my shoes away at school when Ririna came up to me and pointed right at my face.

"Reika-san, you've gotten fat!"

A moment later, Minami-kun and companions had taken her away. That idiot came up to me first thing in the morning to say *that*?

Should I punch her...?

The summer holiday was coming soon, so Class Rep and I were collecting the printouts for that. When we headed to the Student Council room, Fellow Stalking Horse was there.



Come to think of it, the summer break would be when the Student Council members passed their roles over, wouldn't it. I guess that made Fellow Stalking Horse the next President after all.

"Kisshouin-san, could you take this half?"

"Okaaay."

He may have said 'half', but the ratio was actually 3 to 2 his way. He might have been a maiden at heart, but that didn't mean he wasn't also a gentleman.

After we made sure we had them all, the two of us were about to leave when Stalking Horse called out to stop me.

"Did you need something?" I asked.

"...I'm sorry for the bias I showed you back then."

"Pardon?"

What was this?

"Tomoe-senpai also told me off for having preconceived notions of you."

"Eh-, Tomoe-senpai did!?"

What's this? What's this about Tomoe-senpai now!? I want to hear it! Tell me about Tomoe-senpai!

"The other day I met with him, and you came up in conversation. That was when he scolded me..."

Ehhh~!? Stalking Horse met with Tomoe-senpai!? Sneaky! I wanted to meet him too!

"If you have any complaints about what I've done, I'm willing to hear them."

"I have no complaints against you in particular, Mizusaki-kun."

Mm. I just wanted to know how Tomoe-senpai was doing. I have nothing to say to you, Comrade. I suppose if I *really* had to say something, I'd be telling you to actually do

your job as the village vice-chief. Don't think you can graduate from this village before I do!

Obviously I couldn't actually say this, so I left the room even as he looked dissatisfied.

"Kisshouin-san, did something happen between you two?"

"Who knows. I cannot say I quite understand it myself... Nothing bad happened though, so pay no mind."

"That makes sense."

After that he talked about his love life until we reached the classroom.

"Apparently Honda-san is going to be doing the summer vacation remedials, so I'm thinking about doing them too."

I was listening to him talk when a while later Iwamuro-kun came down in the other direction.

"Master! Let me carry those!"

And so even though we were in different classes, he ended up carrying them for me.

"Also, I have something I want your advice on, Master..."

Advice for Iwamuro-kun... I bet it was about avoiding tanning for the summer.

In the hallway with our classrooms I saw Miharu-chan and Nonose-san talking merrily to each other. When Class Rep saw them, he turned into a maiden.

I think the two of them liked the fantasy genre. I overheard them speaking about it a lot. By "mercenary" did that mean they were reading a war novel at the moment?

## CHAPTER 131

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It took no time at all after that for Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun to make up. By now they were back to their lovey-dovey selves. How envious. I hope she spends her whole life away from the Forever Alone Village.

Thanks to us sharing both a mutual enemy and a mutual problem, the bonds between Mao-chan and I rapidly deepened.

Mao-chan told me, "I'm not going eating with Haruto-nisama anymore!" which was a sentiment that I shared. It wouldn't be nice to Erika-san after all.

"Besides," she said, "If Haruto-nisama likes trying restaurants so much then he has Erika-san. She's his girlfriend after all, so she should go. And then, all we have to do is wait for her to get fat... Ku ku ku ku ku!"

Nooooo! Stop ittt! Stop using your adorable face to laugh like a villaaain! Go back to being the innocent Mao-chaaan!

But right after that her expression turned a little anxious.

"Even if I don't have Haruto-nisama, you'll still go out with me, right, Reika-oneesama?"

It was so cute that I hugged her just on instinct. What a cute little sister I have!

Unable to bear her cuteness, I invited her to come over and play during the summer. We were going to have a lot of fun, the two of us. Oh, and Yuuri-kun too, of course.

As for Ichinokura-san, apparently he had received quite a shock from being suddenly hated by his beloved niece. I got a panicked phone call from him.

"Mao-chan is angry at me, and says she won't come eat with me anymore..."

"Oh my."

"What should I do, Reika-san? Can't you talk to her somehow?"

“I apologise, Ichinokura-sama, but Mao-chan is more important to me than you are, so I am on her side in this.”

“Reika-san...”

“You need not worry. Once she calms down a little I am sure she will forgive you. Mao-chan loves you very much, Ichinokura-sama.”

“I hope so... The other day when I met her, she told me that since I was her mother’s brother she would call me Ojisan from now on. It was quite a shock...”

I could hear the emotional damage even over the phone. It must have been rough for a man of only 26 to be called an ojisan. But the punishment for hurting a maiden’s feelings was severe. Ukekekeke!

Today, Mao-chan told me she wanted to try visiting the salon of the Pivoine proper, so I brought her and Yuuri-kun with me. On the way though, she started to get cold feet.

“Maybe I shouldn’t after all... I wouldn’t want to bother anyone.”

“No need to worry,” I reassured her, “We are all members of the Pivoine, after all. And did you not visit once before?”

“I guess...”

I remembered her coming all the way to the salon to invite me to her birthday party. Nobody had any problems back then either, so there was no need to worry at all.

Sure enough, the adorable couple were welcomed the moment we arrived.

“My! How cute! These two are from the Petite, aren’t they? I am Okishima Fuyuko, the current President of the Pivoine, and I’m very pleased to meet you.”

“Yes! I hope we’ll get along!”

“They really are so cute.”

Since the President was fond of them they could expect smooth sailing at school.

We were entertaining my tiny guests when Enjou and Kaburagi came along. The two of them looked confused about the two kids in the room. Mao-chan on the other hand had lost her cool because the famous Emperor and his friend appeared.

Enjou must have noticed because he put on a kind smile and spoke to her.

“Hello. Might you two be from the Petite Pivoine?”

“Yes!”

“Do you know my brother then? His name is Enjou Yukino.”

“Yes! I talk to him quite a lot in the salon!”

“I see. Thanks for getting along with him. You’ll keep looking after him, won’t you?”

“Yes, I will!”

“So what’s he like in the Petite Pivoine?”

“Ummm...”

Enjou’s charming smile was causing her to flush.

“Huh. Friends of Yukino, then?” asked Kaburagi in a rare show of friendliness.

He tapped her on the shoulder lightly.

“If Yukino causes you any trouble, lemme know,” he said.

By now, Mao-chan had turned as red as beetroot. I was just waiting for the steam to start shooting from her ears.

Yuuri-kun on the other hand looked a little sullen. So *cuuuuute*!

Oblivious to his mood, the blushing Mao-chan began telling Enjou all about how Yukino gave it his all at school.

Kaburagi on the other hand *did* notice.

“You’re jealous?” he asked.

Yuuri-kun looked startled. Kaburagi! Don’t you have any delicacy!?

“Get your act together, man! Are you going to let Shuusuke of all people take her from you!” he joked before mussing Yuuri-kun’s hair.

“That isn’t it at all!”

“In that case tell me all about it. C’mon, let’s hear your love troubles,” he said before dragging Yuuri-kun over to a sofa in the corner.

What the-! Kaburagi! Nobody asked for your indoctrination! And to begin with, Mao-chan likes him back so Yuuri-kun is already in another realm compared to you! *You* should be asking *him* for advice! You haven’t made any progress with Wakaba-chan at all, have you! What’s the meaning of that!

Anyhow, I was worried so I tried to listen in on their conversation. Not that I was expecting differently, but Kaburagi was totally useless at romance so it took no time at all for them to start talking about soccer instead. Thank goodness... It would have been terrible if Kaburagi had influenced him badly.

Mao-chan, finally noticing that Yuuri-kun was gone, rushed over to him in a panic. Maybe she was feeling worried.

Kaburagi seemed to find the little couple amusing, and went over to play the Minute Waltz on the piano.

Mao-chan ended up entranced and excited again, and Yuuri-kun ended up pouting—

That day, Kaburagi took every one of Mao-chan’s requests, and pretty much had his own little piano recital. Thanks to that, all the female Pivoine members begged her to come again.

On the way back, Mao-chan placed her hands on her chest and muttered,

“That was so dreamy...”

but for never lying to her, and always being by her side to protect her, I thought Yuuri-kun was a much more wonderful man.

Still though, the power of music was incredible~ Not that I'd ever heard any rumours of Dite being popular.

The next day, Enjou would tell me with a beaten smile that when Yukino-kun heard that we had gone to the Pivoine proper, he ended up sulking a little. I'm sorry, Yukino-kun!

When I came home, Oniisama suddenly asked me,

"Would you prefer the aquarium or the zoo?"

I had no idea what was going on, but it was summer so I told him the aquarium.

"The damage didn't seem too bad this time, so maybe just a one day trip...?"

Seriously, what was he muttering about?

Still, did this mean Oniisama was going to take time out of his busy schedule to take me to the aquarium? I'd be so happy if it were true! Oh, I know! I could invite Mao-chan! If the position of Oniisama was taken from him, I could already see Ichinokura-san taking another blow. Ukekekeke.

## CHAPTER 132

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The summer holidays were right around the corner. It was a lot of fun last year when I went to Karuizawa with Serika-chan and the others. I wondered if anybody wanted to go this year too.

When I asked them I was filled with hope but the responses weren't good. Our schedules wouldn't line up, myself included. Thanks to that we just couldn't find a time. That was a shame. We didn't even have to stay anywhere. I would have just been happy meeting up and going somewhere to play. Come on, guys~

Speaking of my group, it had gotten pretty big by now. Thanks to that it actually comprised smaller groups of closer friends. For example, my group was the one with Serika-chan, Kikuno-chan, Ayame-chan, Ru'ne-chan etc.

Anyway, on a more hopeful note, bringing that up had stirred the enthusiasm in my friends, so we decided to see about rearranging our schedules. Hooray!

It'd be nice if I could see Sakura-chan and Aoi-chan too.

Still feeling excited, I headed to the Handicrafts Club to find everybody there. Apparently each year they all gathered to discuss the wedding dress for the school festival. I was only a provisional member last year so I wasn't called. I obviously did this year. I was totally useless with the sewing machine and embroidery so they couldn't count on me. I attended though. If I didn't I would shame my position as an official member of the club. I could help clean up the scraps of cloth and thread that fell around when they were creating the dress. While I wasn't cleaning I could focus on my own exhibition instead. I took Minami-kun's advice and decided to create as large a doll with needle felting as I could. With my meagre skills I needed to start now or I'd have no chance of finishing it in time. That meant I had to decide on what I wanted to make, and quickly.

At first I thought about making a teddy bear, but there was already a girl planning on making plush doll teddy bears. She was so much better than me that I chickened out. Still, a cute animal would be nice~ Maybe rabbits, or dogs, or cats~? Hmm, but it wouldn't be very impressive if they were too small either... Oh, something perfect came to mind.



It was my confidante, Beatrice.

The first thing I did at cram school was ask Umewaka-kun if I could use Beatrice as my model. He happily agreed.

“A doll of Beatrice... What a wonderful idea, Kisshouin-san!”

“You think?”

“Yeah! I understand, Kisshouin-san. By doing this, we can immortalise Beatrice’s cuteness forever. Bea-tan is the cutest in the world, isn’t she! Ah, but what if more Bea-tan fans appear in Suiran because of this!?”

Umewaka-kun was uncontrollable. I really should have just asked somebody else or gone to the zoo... If by some chance I made her ugly I could see a huge mess coming from this. Better make her 30% cuter than she is.

“And so, Umewaka-kun, I would like to have her measurements, as well as photos of both her entire body and individual body parts. Could you prepare these for me before we meet next time?”

“Size? Beatrice is 32 centimetres long. Her weight is... No, no! She’s a girl so I can’t tell you! Bea-tan would get angry if I did!”

“I see...”

He began to happily speak nonsense so I ignored him. 32 centimetres though. She was surprisingly small. Wait, so maybe I could make her life-sized then!?

“The weight is fine, but if possible could I have her girth and other size measurements? If possible I would like to create something life-sized.”

“Eh!? Really!? A life-sized Bea-tan doll... She’ll be so cute once you’re done... Oh! Then what if you measured her directly? Wouldn’t it be easier to measure what you want yourself then? And I think it would be easier for you to picture her after you’ve really met her.”

“May I truly!?”

“Yeah. We can meet at a park sometime. Is that okay?”

“Most definitely!”

This would make my life so much easier! I could even take photos of all her parts now!

“Then when shall we do it? I will be happy to do this whenever is convenient for you. Please let me know when and where.”

“Hmmm... Oh! But you need to wait a little! Right now Bea-tan is in the middle of exercising and dieting. She ate a little too much and hadn’t been exercising properly so she’s gotten a little fat. Please just give us a bit more time!”

Oh my god!

I feel you so bad, Bea-taaaaan!

Are you actually my doppelganger!?

“...Of course! A girl must be at her best for these things. I will wait. To do otherwise would only be humiliating for her!”

“Thanks, Kisshouin-san! We’ll definitely make the cutest Bea-tan possible!”

The two of us exchanged a firm handshake.

Oh. Dog Lover-kun’s silver ring was actually designed after a dog’s footprint.

Maybe I could thank him with a matching necklace and collar.

I got another email from Bea-tan.

“I’m so happy that you chose me as a model! I’ll do my best with Aa-tan to diet, so just you wait! Bea-tan won’t lose to an empty stomach!”

Since the other me, Beatrice, was giving her all, I had to be doing the same. After some thought, the way I spent lazing around each day was making me slack, both in body and mind.

So to counteract that my first idea was running. It was inexpensive too, since I only needed my body. It was summer though. Since getting a heatstroke would be pretty scary, maybe I could run around the neighbourhood in the early morning or maybe in the evening instead?

At dinner I brought the topic up with my family, and somehow ended up with a dedicated bodyguard for when I went jogging. Was it that big of a deal...?

It was just going to be around the neighbourhood, so I told them so many times that it would be fine, but every single one of them told me it was too dangerous to go by myself and rejected the idea. Ehhhhhhh. If they got me a bodyguard just for jogging then wouldn't that make it really hard to give up...? I knew myself really well, so I could already see what was going to happen. What was I going to do... Take back what I said...? Yeah, that sounded good.

Or so I thought, but they had immediately prepared the bodyguard for me so I had no path of retreat...

Mmmmm... It was going to be really warm... I was thinking of changing to doing radio callisthenics instead~

Haha, no good...?

When they introduced me to my bodyguard he was a tanned, muscular ojisama.

"Reika-ojousama! I had track experience back when I was a student, so I can guide you on your running form as well! Please don't worry about a thing! Let's try our best together to improve your records! Today we'll start with a light 3 kilometre run! Let's begin!"

Just how enthusiastic was he about athletics... Oh dear...

"Perhaps instead of jogging, we could do radio callisthenics," I tried, but...

"I understand! Let's add radio callisthenics on top of the jogging then!"

What was I going to do. I was filled with anxiety now. I couldn't even run 500 metres, you know!?

Okaasama took me to the beauty parlour, maybe in preparation for the detox course or something.

They oiled up the fat I had gained from eating these last few months and then began massaging it mercilessly.

I suddenly remembered The Restaurant With Many Orders.

Were they rubbing the flavouring into me to make a French tart or something...?

Aahh... And so my 2nd year summer holidays began.

## Chapter 133

My first time jogging was one early morning, where the sun had only just appeared. Even though it was so early in the morning, my bodyguard, Mihara-san, was already greeting me with a lively smile.

“Good morning, Reika-ojousama! Come! We’ll do our best, starting today!”

“Good morning... I will be in your capable care.”

After doing some leg stretches in the garden, we began slowly running around my neighbourhood.

Mihara-san had suggested 3 kilometres for our first day. I told him that I had never run for 3 kilometres before but he told me that I had to run at least 3 kilometres for it to have any point, so in the end I had no choice but to bear with it.

“We aren’t worrying about your time today, so just go at your own pace!”

“I understand.”

Under his encouragement my running was energetic at first, but before long my feet were leaden. My lungs hurt too.

“Eh-! Reika-ojousama, what’s the matter!?”

“...It hurts.”

“We’ve only just run 500 metres, you know?!”

Like I care. I don’t think I can run 3 kilometres unless we drop the pace more.

The hot-blooded exercise enthusiast Mihara-san was having none of it though.

“Reika-ojousama! You’re running slower than you walk, you know!? Come on!”

Impossible. It hurts. I want to give up...

I was already heaving before we reached the 1 kilometre mark. I was slumped over as I ran, and my arms looked more like I was dog-paddling than I was running. And my lungs... my lungs... were burning... I swear I could taste blood...

“Reika-ojousama! Swing your arms more! Come one! One! Two! One! Two!”

Mihara-san began to count out a rhythm to encourage me as he ran beside me.

“Don’t give in to yourself, Reika-ojousama!”

“Reika-ojousama! We haven’t even reached the halfway point! Give it some oomph!”

“Keep your head up and keep at it! Go! Go! Go!”

Mihara-san’s voice rang out through the affluent neighbourhood.

Pain... Why had I ever thought this would be a good idea... When were the endorphins going to come... I kept waiting, but the runner’s high never came for me... Pain... Painnnnn...

In the end, it came down to him pushing me from behind, but I somehow managed the 3 kilometres back to the house.

With shaking legs, I collapsed onto the garden without a care. The grass was sharp and prickly but I couldn’t bring myself to bother.

“Reika-ojousama! After the jog we still have your stretches!”

Impossible... I didn't have the energy to get up anymore... My heart was pounding dangerously in my chest.

A wide-eyed Oniisama discovered me laying around in the garden.

"Reika, you okay...?"

I tried to speak but only strange wheezing noises came out, so I shook my head instead.

"Mihara-san, how far did she run?"

"Roughly 3 kilometres."

"Hmmmm, this bad after just 3 kilometres...?" said Oniisama, sounding troubled.

Sorry for being useless, you two.

"But no need to worry! With daily running she'll have the stamina in no time!"

Eh-!? I'm going to be doing this *daily*!?

I wanted to reply but it hurt too much to. Please no, just today was enough already... Please, no more running...

But Mihara-san had been hired specifically to guard me during my jogs. Hiring him based on a whim, and then quitting after one day? I couldn't bring myself to be so selfish... But I hated this...

The sunlight was getting stronger now so if I lay there I would tan. Somehow gathering the strength to get up, Mihara-san and Oniisama supported me as I headed indoors. Inside I lay down again.

Thanks to Mihara-san's hot-blooded pep talk the whole neighbourhood was aware of what a sorry sight I was. And given how much Okaasama cared about face, she was absolutely livid about it. Things were just horrible...

Starting from the next day we were driven to a nearby park to do the jogging.

But Okaasama was still in a bad mood. Things were just horrible...

The only spot of encouragement came from Beatrice's emails.

"Today I ran 5 kilometres!"

"Today I ran in the evening too!"

Thank god I wasn't alone—

I had no choice but to agree to the detox thing to cheer Okaasama up.

I *still* didn't wanna go... But if I said that now Okaasama would finally throw a fit for real. This was my punishment for shaming her in public.

But at least it was just a detox course. It couldn't be as bad as last year's fasting...

I arrived with Okaasama at the Kaburagi group's hotel. The hotel porter helped us with our luggage and we were guided into a room where acquaintances of my mother were waiting. They were older women from the upper class, and after looking around, many of them had been at the fasting last year. I supposed that a few of them were into dieting fads, and had invited all the rest along. What a pain...

That was when I noticed Maihama-san present, who was for some reason looking dressed up. She noticed me too, and came over.

"Goodness, you came too, Reika-san?" she said with a challenging look.

"Yes. You too, it seems, Maihama-san," I replied with a smile.

"Fasting last year, and now a detox this year? You sure are working hard. You must really be desperate for her approval. Masaya-sama's Okaasama, I mean."

Haah?

"You seem to be misunderstanding, but I am simply here to accompany my mother. The shocking addition here is you. For all that you mocked it last year, you seem to be standing right here. How the direction of the wind changes. They say that to slay the general you must first begin with the horse, but just because you yourself are in that position is no reason to project onto me. It is offensive."

*“What was that!?”*

Hmph. She could glare all she wanted, it wouldn't make her scarier. And once again, her curls were half-baked today.

I bade her gokigen'yoh with a smile and then left.

This trip was already turning into something annoying though...

Oh! Akimi-san! Hiiiiii!

I could feel Maihama-san glaring from behind but I ignored it.

When everybody was here, Kaburagi's Okaasama appeared on scene with a bang.



## CHAPTER 134

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We all sat down and welcomed Madam Kaburagi.

“Thank you all for participating today! This detox plan is the course that our hotel has the most confidence in, and we recommend it one hundred percent.”

With that, she came around and greeted each guest with a fabulous smile on her face. Maihama-san had chosen her seat to make sure Mrs. Kaburagi would notice her. She was really too easy to read.

The hotel staff came out to explain the details of the course to us. Besides the difference of eating macrobiotic foods, the itinerary was more-or-less the same as the fasting course. Basically a lot of visits to the beauty salon, and some elegant exercising at the gym.

I thought it was a waste to be spending time here instead of on my summer cram school course but Okaasama’s orders were absolute. I resolved to study while we weren’t doing anything.

After the explanations we had some free time so Maihama-san immediately sidled up to Madam Kaburagi. Sales time, huh.

As for me, since Okaasama was chatting to some women I assumed were her friends, I went to chat with Akimi-san instead.

“We’re together again, Reika-sama. I’m really glad that I have somebody my age to talk to.”

“I feel the same way. And we will be eating this year, so I feel a little more hopeful this time.”

“Huhu.”

We chatted peacefully for a while when Madam Kaburagi came over with Maihama-san in tow.

“Reika-san! And Akimi-san too! Thank you for coming! I’m glad to see the two of you

here today. And you in particular, Reika-san. You wouldn't come to any of our parties so I've missed you."

"Gokigen'yoh. I will be in your care today," I said after standing up.

"It has been a while, Kaburagi-sama," followed Akimi-san.

"Reika-san, how has school been? That boy Masaya won't tell me a thing. Please tell me all about it instead."

"Well... Nothing truly comes to mind but... Masaya-sama constantly tops the exam scores, and seems to have fun each day with his friends."

"Really? We're talking about that unsociable boy of mine, aren't we? Are you sure he hasn't caused you some kind of trouble? If he does something brusque be sure to tell me."

"Masaya-sama being brusque is unthinkable. Why, the other day when it rained he played Chopin's Raindrop..."

"My! That boy did something like that!?" she laughed happily.

Maihama-san glared at me venomously while I spoke about a side of Kaburagi that she didn't know about. Don't hurt yourself over there.

While I was talking one of the staff members came looking for Mrs. Kaburagi.

"I'll be having dinner with you all later. We can continue this then."

"I understand. I will be looking forward to it."

When Mrs. Kaburagi left, Maihama-san spat out a parting line before leaving herself.

"You'd better not get too full of yourself just because Masaya-sama's Okaasama likes you a little bit, okay!?"

Akimi-san looked a little frightened.

"...Um, is that okay, Reika-san? You're being glared at quite a bit..."

“Nothing at all to worry about. For some reason that girl seems to have arbitrarily designated me her rival.”

Akimi-san looked at me with sympathy.

“I see... It must be rough...”

It wasn't though. If she wanted to squawk at me whenever we met it was no skin off my back. Of course, if we went to the same school this would be an entirely different matter.

Since Okaasama was heading back to our room now, Akimi-san and I promised to talk more later, before I followed after her.

They told us that before dinner we were free to go on a walk or exercise, so I made for the gym. It wasn't really in my nature to sit there, impassively forging my muscles with the gym equipment, so there wasn't much of that going on. Still, I decided to at least try the exercise bike for today.

I was just heading towards it when Maihama-san came along. Eh-, this girl was going to do it too? She noticed me too, and frowned.

Ah well, I thought, nothing to do with me. Following the instructor's advice I set the weight and then started biking. Oh! This was kinda fun!

On the bike next to mine, Maihama-san started pedalling faster than I did. She glanced at me and then shot me a victorious sneer. Annoying.

I began pedalling faster than she did. This is my win!

But then Maihama-san increased her speed again. Grrr! I won't lose to you!

The two of us started crazy pedalling like real athletes.

I could hear Coach Mihara in my mind.

***“Don't lose to yourself!”***

Yes, Coach!

***“You can do it!”***

Yes, Coach!

The two of us kept our pace. We ignored the instructor’s calls for us to stop and continued pedalling away. Uryyyaaahhh!

But for some reason Maihama-san suddenly stopped and got off the bike.

“Aren’t you taking this a bit too seriously, Reika-san? Your hair is a mess. It’s unsightly. I don’t know why you’ve one-sidedly decided this was some competition but I’m not going to play along.”

*Haahh!?* The one who started this competition was *her!* And she was soaked in sweat herself! Coach! This girl ran away because she was about to lose to herself!

“Woow, look at how hard you’re breathing. That’s just sad.”

She was putting up a tough act as she mocked me but she was breathing harder than I was. It was rare to meet a woman who so perfectly fit the word ‘boomerang’.

Since the instructor was looking pretty nervous, I decided to take my leave.

“You seem like the one who has been pushing herself,” I began, “There are bags under your eyes, you know? Oh wait, my mistake. Excuse me for my impertinence, Maihama-san, but would it not be better to invest in some *waterproof* mascara?”

“Eh!?”

While Maihama-san was taking out her mirror in a panic I used that opening to escape the gym. Hooohohohohohohoho! Relying on mascara even though you’re just a high school student? You only have yourself to blame, fool. Now then, Ms. Instructor, please show me to the next machine!

At dinner Maihama-san had lost the mascara and was using fake eyelashes instead. I see. So her weak point was her eyes. If she caused too much trouble I’d rip those stupid eyelashes off.

I turned to her and fluttered my naturally long lashes. How’s that? Jealous?

Before we began eating, there was a lecture on macrobiotic theory. Lots of foods were forbidden, and following the theory closely would be too hard on a white rice lover like me. I loved it. I loved it so much that I had considered buying a rice cooker to keep in my room. Yamagata Dashi on white rice...



*A regional dish from the Yamagata region named 'dashi' (no relation to the stock).  
Generally minced vegetables, other leafy greens, and soy sauce etc.*

I wanted some of that now. Pickled food was amazing.

The madams around me seemed pretty impressed with it all but high society was filled with gourmands. It was impossible for them to change to a macrobiotic diet. Surprisingly though, the shy Akimi-san was listening passionately and even asking questions.

When the lecture was done we changed venues for dinner. I had come in expecting something like the vegetarian meal I had during the middle school trip, but it was actually really delicious. I suppose I should have expected this from a hotel owned by the Kaburagi. High standards in all things, huh. The madams seemed to be enjoying themselves as well.

Since we weren't just starving ourselves on drinks, this time the conversation was a lot more lively too. Even I was talking a little.

Akimi-san was trying one dish after another, and sometimes even asking the chef questions about it. Who knew she was actually interested in this stuff.

Even after we were done eating she kept asking questions and taking notes with a pen

in hand. Mrs. Kaburagi who had planned this course, seemed quite pleased that she was interested, and ended up joining in on the discussion.

When it seemed to be finished, I called out to her.

“Akimi-san.”

“Ah-, Reika-san. What’s wrong?”

“You were quite passionate just now. Did you have an interest in macrobiotic foods?”

“Yes. I got to learn about some very interesting things. I’m glad that I came today.”

Huh! Last year she was so unenthusiastic that she was hiding and eating snacks. She had come a long way.

“Akimi-san, shall we have some tea? If possible I would like to hear about this too.”

“It would be my pleasure, if you’re fine with me.”

The two of us moved to the hotel’s tea room.

“Actually, the truth is that I’m interested in cooking.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. My major in university was in that field too, and I planned to become a chef of some sort...”

“My.”

I was a little surprised that somebody shy like Akimi-san had such clear ideas of what she wanted in life. Plenty of rich girls just prepared to get married.

“Do you mean to open your own restaurant?”

“No, I’m nowhere near that talented... I just think it would be nice if I could teach at a cooking school one day...”

Akimi-san gave an embarrassed smile.

I see.

“That’s why I’m trying to learn as much about cooking as I can. This macrobiotic cuisine was just some of it. I’m actually enrolled in a few cooking schools, you know?”

“Truly!”

She began to happily tell me about the different kinds of flavourings and broths used around the world. Apparently she was also a collector of soy sauce and ponzu.

“It’s because I’m like this that I’m fat, isn’t it...”

“Please do not think that way. I myself would love to try your food one day.”

“Really? I’ve still got a long way to go though, okay?”

I was glad to have somebody so responsive to talk to this time. I wish she had opened up to me a bit sooner. Maybe I would have enjoyed last year too. Then again, it would have been some new form of torture to talk about food during a fasting course.

When I returned to my room, I realised that Umewaka-kun had sent me an email.

“Everyone wishes you were here doing the summer course with us. Beatrice is more or less back to her ideal figure, so let’s decide when to meet next week.”

Attached was a picture of Beatrice kissing him on the cheek.

I decided to give my all too. I wouldn’t lose to Beatrice.

The next day during the stroll and yoga sessions, I was swamped by housewives asking about Kaburagi. Come to think of it, this happened last year too, didn’t it~ These aunties loved hearing stories about youths.

“Reika-san, are you close with Masaya-san?”

“No, not particularly.”

“My. But that’s not what the rumours say. I’ve heard that you two are quite close.”

“Masaya-san sounds so dreamy~ If only I were a bit younger.”

“Goodness! You’re scandalous. But me too.”

“I know, right! Uhuhu, it seems like we’re all fans of Masaya-sama.”

“You are too, aren’t you, Reika-san?”

They still hadn’t run out of energy yet.

As for Maihama-san, apparently she was jealous when some of the madams joked about my being perfect for Kaburagi.

At some point she tried to trip me, but I jumped over it without a word.

Suiran or Yurinomiya, small fry were all the same.



## CHAPTER 135

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### ***The Tale of Genji – Chapter 25 (Fireflies) – Summary & Analysis***

*There are several men making advances to Tamakazura, but Genji keeps them away from this child in his care. Genji is eager to marry the girl to someone worthwhile, so he arranges for Prince Hotaru to visit her. Then, when the prince is visiting, Genji carefully orchestrates a way for Prince Hotaru to actually see Tamakazura in the light of fireflies. Of course, Genji's ploy works and Hotaru is taken with the beautiful woman. Unfortunately, it also throws Tamakazura into even more confusion.*

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On the second day of our detox course, I followed Okaasama around. We went to a beauty salon, and then a ganbanyoku “stone spa” where we lay on heated stones. At the yoga studio I was ecstatic when the instructor said I was good at it.

Outside of our meals I never saw Maihama-san so things were more or less peaceful.

That night, Madam Kaburagi appeared to have dinner together with us.

I realised while I was eating that although brown rice and other cereals weren't bad once in a while, eating this every day was a little much. I was thinking about the food when Madam Kaburagi changed seats to talk to me. Uu...

“Reika-san, how are you finding the current course?”

“The course let me grow familiar with natural foods. It has been a very worthwhile two days.”

“I'm very happy to hear you say that. You're skinny after all, so you don't need to diet, after all?”

“Goodness, that is not true.”

Thank you for the flattery at least. I know better than anybody what the state of my body is. It was so obviously flattery though that I couldn't even feel good about it.

I gave her a polite smile.

“How are you planning to spend your summer break, Reika-san?”

“A summer study course at cram school, lessons as usual, meeting up with some friends. Just a few things. Oh, and going on a trip with my family, I suppose.”

“My, that sounds fun. Where are you going this year?”

“My mother is thinking of Austria. She wants to see an opera on the water.”

Okaasama enjoys things like ballet and opera because she loves being immersed in worlds that are beautiful and fantastical. As to be expected from the woman who tried turning her daughter into a bisque doll.

“My, what a wonderful time that would be! I’ve been to see the Seebühne as well, before! It had incredible impact. Do you like opera as well, Reika-san?”

“Whenever we were in Europe, my mother would take us to the theatre if anything she liked was playing. I am ashamed to say that although I enjoyed myself each time I am not very familiar with opera in and of itself. I do understand that I would enjoy it more if I had a deeper understanding, but...”

“Well that’s not true! I think simply opening your heart and enjoying it the way you do is much better than going in there to analyse and evaluate it. Which operas do you like?”

“Although this is quite a mainstream answer, I like The Magic Flute and Lohengrin.”

“You like Lohengrin? Then what about Tristan and Isolde from Wagner as well?”

“It was very passionate.”

“My!” she smiled.

We continued to talk about opera for a while when she clapped her hands together.

“Oh, that’s right! I’m organising a firefly catching event. Please do come! I know you like fantasy worlds so I think you would definitely enjoy it!”

“Eh...”

That was a bit... If possible, I wanted to completely refuse. Even now I was only here because Okaasama had half threatened me into it.

I spent some time thinking about how to refuse when Mrs. Kaburagi called out to Okaasama sitting next to me and sealed the deal. Ugh!

“Firefly catching! That sounds wonderful. Isn’t that great, Reika-san? You liked the Tale of Genji, didn’t you?”

“Oh, Reika-san likes the Tale of Genji? Then it sounds like you must become the Tamakazura of the night.”

“My, hohoho,” laughed Okaasama, “Then who would Prince Hotaru be?”

“How about my Masaya?”

“My, Reika-san! How about it? Isn’t that great?”

Without any input from me, the two of them had begun getting excited all on their own. Please give me a break...

And to begin with, Okaasama, when did I say I liked the Tale of Genji? Why did the husband and wife of the Kisshouin family have a habit of suddenly making up lies.

Maihama-san’s eyes were something to behold as she listened to our conversation.

After finishing the 3 day 2 night detox course, we were finally going home today.

Okaasama had been in a terrific mood ever since I received the invitation last night. When we were back in our room she kept whispering,

“Masaya-san’s Okaasama seems to like you, so this is your chance to get close to him.”

like some sort of brainwashing tape, which was scary so I went to sleep with my futon covering my head.

We were gathered in the meeting room to listen to the staff recap the course when Madam Kaburagi appeared, along with her son.

The ladies around me squealed in excitement at Kaburagi Masaya's sudden appearance.

"Everybody, thank you for the last two days. Today I'm here with my son Masaya."

"Goodness! We're overjoyed to meet with Masaya-san!"

The madams began to surround him like housewives swarming a popular Enka singer. Wow, so this was strength of Obasama Power. Even Maihama-san was overpowered by it, meandering here and there outside of the ring of madams. My own Okaasama wasn't amongst them though. Thank goodness...

Anyway, apparently Kaburagi had been brought here as a reward for them. He was standing there congratulating each one on a job well done.

Hmm. Kaburagi might not have had a shred of courtesy while we were at school, but apparently he behaved like a proper heir outside.

Over the last two days, Akimi-san and I had become really friendly, so the two of us exchanged our email addresses.

Finally freed from the madams, Kaburagi came this way.

"Huh, you're here too?"

"Gokigen'yoh, Kaburagi-sama."

"Just so you know, this course isn't going to lose you any weight. Exercise."

Wow, flat-out denying the effectiveness of your own hotel's course?

"I was simply here to accompany my mother... I was not here hoping to lose weight, you know?"

It was embarrassing so I pushed the blame onto Okaasama. And it was true, anyhow.

"Hmmm. Well whatever."

If you don't care, then don't say it.

“But man, must be rough going on some diet course with your mum even though it’s summer break.”

“It was technically a detox course, though. And did your mother not make you do the same thing, today? It does not seem all that different.”

“Guess so.”

Maihama-san ran over and shot in from the side.

“Masaya-sama! I’m so glad that I could meet you today! We didn’t get to speak much at the last party. Do you have any plans after this? How about having some tea with me in the loungeroom downstairs?”

“Sorry, I’ve already got plans,” he said disinterestedly.

Despite that, Maihama-san continued to cling to him. Insistent, wasn’t she.

“See ya,” he said before turning around and leaving, all while still trying to get rid of Maihama-san.

Naturally, Maihama-san ran after him. She did remember to stop and glare at me though.

“Yesterday, Reika-san stepped on my foot~” she tattled to Kaburagi/

“Uh huh,” he replied without much thought.

I felt exhausted...

When I arrived at cram school, Umewaka-kun and I immediately discussed when to meet. It was going to be warm, so in consideration of Beatrice we decided on a place with an indoor dog park. We might have just meeting up because I wanted to meet Beatrice, but if we met up alone I was liable to be considered an enemy by Moriyama-san again. That’s why I suggested inviting everyone else along.

Moriyama-san was obviously fine with that. Everyone else seemed like they could come too, which was great. Umewaka-kun began passionately telling everybody about

how much he loved his cute dog.

I got the feeling that recently I was hanging around a lot of passionate people... Well, by lots I just meant Mihara-san and Umewaka-kun, of course.

At night I received more lovey-dovey pictures of him and Beatrice, along with an email.

“I’m going to dress up in my favourite ribbon when we meet! How exciting! Do you have any clothes you want me to wear? Bea-tan, is really excited to meet you, Reika-tan!”

Yep, yep, I’m looking forward to meeting you too.

If partially because I want to see this trainwreck couple in person...

## CHAPTER 136

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On that day that we were meeting Beatrice, the lot of us met up in front of the station closest to the dog park. I was the only one who turned up with an umbrella so everyone started saying stuff like “That’s an ojousama for you,” but Okaasama would get angry if I tanned so I really had no choice here.

Still, I was out here to play with a dog so for once I was wearing something pretty casual; just a tunic and leggings.

“Heeey!”

Umewaka-kun appeared from the ticket gates. In his hands was a large carry bag.

“Kept you guys waiting! I’ve brought Beatrice!”

When he gently unzipped the bag, a brown dog’s head suddenly popped out.

“*Cute!*”

She had adorable round eyes and was *so* many times cuter in person!

“She’s so cute~”

“Beatrice~”

we said as we surrounded her bag.

“They think you’re cute. Isn’t that great, Bea-tan~?” Umewaka-kun asked her. Already we could see some of his dog lover side.

It was going to get warm if we stayed there any longer, so all of us headed for the dog park as we chatted.

“So you can even bring dogs onto the train then.”

“Yep. As long as you’ve got a carry bag and pay for their ticket.”

Perhaps she was curious, because Bea-tan's head turned this way and that as it poked out of the bag. Sooo cutee~ Umewaka-kun was petting her head even as he spoke to us.

He had a tote bag with him as well, so he was actually carrying quite a lot. Apparently he had Beatrice's brush and water inside.

The dog park was only a few minutes walk from the station. When we got there we told the receptionist that we had a reservation .

I wanted to be able to take pictures and measure her without getting in anybody else's way, which is why I reserved an area for us in advance.

Once we went inside, Umewaka-kun opened the bag entirely and Beatrice leapt right out.

"Woof!"

Full of energy, she began to run circles around Umewaka-kun.

"Bea-taaan~! It must have been sooo cramped in there! You've been *such* a good girl!"

Umewaka-kun knelt down and rubbed his cheek against Beatrice, who whined happily.

They were in their own lovey dovey world.

"They're even more affectionate than I expected," said Kitazawa-kun as he watched them. Kitazawa-kun was the one with the brown hair.

Although, as somebody who had received the Bea-tan emails, I could tell this was only just the beginning.

"Okay, Bea-tan! Today you're going to be the model for your friend Reika-tan~ Let's doll you up so that you're as cute as you can be~"

Umewaka-kun pulled out a brush from the tote bag and began carefully brushing her hair. Her fluffy, glossy brown hair was probably thanks to Umewaka-kun's daily care. She was wearing pink hair accessories on both ears that were designed after flowers.



“Look~ You’re so beautiful now! Bea-tan, say hello to Reika-tan and the others!”

“Reika-tan...?” asked Moriyama-san with a stiff expression.

Uh oh. Um, my being ‘Reika-tan’ was actually because I was Bea-tan’s confidante.

I was about to explain to her when Bea-tan suddenly leapt at me.

“Wahh!”

I fell onto my butt because of it, and Bea-tan began climbing up my body and chewing on my hair.

“Uwahhh! What!? What’s happening!?”

She was worked up into a frenzy, and wouldn’t let go of it. Help! Somebody help! Owner! Where’s the owner!?

The others weren’t sure what to do and alternated between reaching out and hesitating.

“Oi, Umewaka!” called Kitazawa-kun.

“Look how happy to meet Reika-tan she is~ Are you trying to help groom Reika-tan? You’re so kind, Bea-tan~”

Gnawing and pulling at my hair is supposed to be grooming!?

You really can’t do this, Bea-tan! My hair is treated with chemicals, you’ll fall ill! Stop licking it! Aahh, my hair was getting soaked with drool...

Dog Lover, come do something!

“Bea-tan is really happy to meet somebody with curly hair like hers. It’s the joy of meeting a comrade.”

“Uh, Umewaka, Kisshouin-san seems like she’s hitting her limit... You’d better go help.”

“Really? Kisshouin-san, are you at your limit?”

I nodded with all my might.

“I see. Then Bea-tan, come here~”

Finally, Dog Lover-kun came and picked Beatrice up from behind. Even so, she seemed intent on biting my hair until the end.

“Kisshouin-san, are you okay!?” exclaimed Moriyama-san, as she and the others helped me up.

Thank goodness I wore leggings today...

“...Yes, I am. I was simply a little surprised...”

“Your hair is a mess though... Maybe it would be better for you to take a trip to the bathroom...”

Yes, I think I will...

I staggered to the bathroom. Using the tap I washed the drool off my hair, and then the brown hair off my face...

When I left the bathroom after somehow fixing myself up, Umewaka-kun apologised to me. Since he seemed to have come back to his senses I told him it was fine.

Now then, it was time for the present. In the end I had decided on a cute carry-bag for Beatrice. It was blue with a sunflower pattern on it. On the side it even had a little name tag that said in English, ‘Asuka&Beatrice’.

My original idea had been to get them a matching necklace and choker pair. After some thought though, Beatrice might have been one thing, but giving Umewaka-kun an accessory as a present would probably turn Moriyama-san suspicious again. So I went with something else.

“Uwahhh! So cute! Can I really have this? Thanks, Kisshouin-san!” exclaimed an overjoyed Umewaka-kun.

I was glad that he liked it.

“Look, Bea-tan,” he said to her, “Reika-tan got a cute bag for you! Wah! And it has Aa-

tan and Bea-tan's names on it too! Aren't you happy?"

Bea-tan was chewing on the bag. What mattered was that she seemed to like it.

After a short break, I began the photography session. Apparently he had taken her to a salon to get her hair trimmed. She was as good looking as she would get. I pulled out my digital camera and began taking photos of her whole body, as well as each part. Between shots I took measurements as well.

"Oh, would it be better if she changed ribbons? I brought a whole bunch."

"Uwah... You've even got a crown!?" exclaimed one of the boys.

"Of course," he replied, "Bea-san is a princess. How could she not have a tiara? Right, Bea-tan?"

Bored of the photographs, Bea-tan began to run around the place.

"Waaait~!" chased Umewaka-kun. "Gotcha!"

"Woof woof!"

"Bea-tan, you coy little thing~!"

Everybody seemed taken aback. He was even more of a dog lover than they expected. They looked a little creeped out.

Later on in the day we had some tea at the dog park's café together, before going on a walk.

Umewaka-kun was glued to Bea-tan the whole time.

"Umewaka was *this* kind of guy...?" I heard Moriyama-san mutter.

Oh? Was Moriyama-san going to be joining my Forever Alone Village?

While Sakaki-san cheered her up, Umewaka-kun was showering his lover with kisses.

Since he knew that I was making a doll, Umewaka-kun was thoughtful enough to keep a lock of hair from Bea-tan's visit to the salon, which he handed to me in a ziplock bag.

Now I knew what colour to use. Umewaka-kun might have been a handful, but he was a good person.

I didn't waste any time before heading to a handicrafts store to buy the right coloured wool. I'd be working hard from tonight onwards!

"Bea-tan was super happy to meet you, Reika-tan! Please make Bea-tan's doll beautiful."

Leave it to me.

## CHAPTER 137

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I was already having trouble.

With reference to designs for a dog in a needle felting book, I was trying to come up with a design for Beatrice. Holy hell, though, did I have no artistic talent.

I had been given art lessons before, back as a child when we wanted to guarantee my entrance into Suiran, but apparently none of that had stuck at all...

I mean, the body was fine since I could just follow the book, but I couldn't decide on how I wanted the face. The face was the most important part for dolls!

After discarding design after design, by now I was fully aware of how little artistic merit I had, so in the end I enlarged a photo of her instead. Knowing when to give up was an important skill for a person.

But wow was realism hard. Maybe it would be better to practice a few times? Come to think of it, what was actually hard was my choice in a model! Was it actually a huge mistake to choose a long-haired breed!?

When I went cram school, Umewaka-kun unknowingly applied pressure to me.

"How's the Bea-tan doll coming along?"

It just made it really hard to say 'I think I can't do it after all'. The expectations were heavy. What was I to do? I had overestimated my own ability. Was I really going to get this done in time!?

Umewaka-kun gave me a photo of Bea-tan's head peeking out from the carry bag I gifted them, so I came up with the idea of just buying another bag and only doing the head... How little time would it take to realise that it was just a cop-out...?

Since I had needle felting stuff everywhere I was finding it really hard to study without distraction. And I had so much homework too...

Speaking of which, I made quite a lot of progress studying in the library hadn't I? That was it. I could go to the library.

I was worried that a small library wouldn't have any seats so I went to a large one instead. It was busy, true, but there were free seats here and there so I took one of the closer ones. I was taking my stationery out when I caught sight of the person sitting opposite me. A shock ran through my body.

Naru-kun!?

The person studying in front of me looked just like the cousin I had in my previous life, Naruhito-kun.

It was Naru-kun. Naru-kun.

My cousin Naru-kun was older than me and always looked after me whenever we met. He was my first crush.

Incidentally, Naruhito(成人)-kun's name came from his birthday. He was born on the 15th of January, so his parents had simply named him after the Coming of Age Day(成人の日). Who would have known that the government would invalidate the whole thing by changing it to the 2nd Monday of the year instead.

"The origin of my name..." mourned poor Naru-kun.

It was a nostalgic memory.

"It's okay, Naru-kun. I'll always remember your birthday, okay?" I remember trying to cheer him up.

Naru-kun who was kind to me, and who had a habit of sometimes playing dumb.

The boy in front of me was the spitting image of Naru-kun back in his high school days.

No... To be honest I couldn't tell if he really did look identical. Although I thought about them on occasion, I was starting to forget the faces of my old family.

Even so, I was sure that this boy resembled him. He had been a kind person that Mozart's Twinkle Twinkle Little Star would have suited.

I ended up pretty much ignoring my homework beginning to end, in favour of observing Naru-kun as my heart pounded.

After dinner I complained to Oniisama about my lack of progress.

“I couldn’t even draw the design properly so it has been all failures since the beginning. I thought to use the photos instead, but even that has been difficult...”

“Hmmmm, could I see those photos and the design you drew?”

I went to my room to fetch them.

“Here.”

“...I see.”

Oniisama looked over my sketchbook and the the many photos. Waaah! My shame was on display for Oniisama to see! I’ve changed my mind, please don’t look!

I tried to get it back from him, but Oniisama was quicker than I was and began sketching Beatrice in it. And he was so skilled!

“Oniisama, you know how to sketch!?”

“Not really? I just gave it a shot. Here,” he said, holding out a realistic drawing to me. You’re so good, Oniisama!

Since he was so good I tried asking him to draw me a design to, and in no time he had drawn things exactly as I wanted. Heavens! To think that the Messiah was living with me all along!

But we were related, so how come there was such a difference in talent... I was just a tiny bit jealous.

“There truly is not a thing you can’t do, Oniisama!”

“Now that’s not true. You just need to know the trick to it.”

“I had no clue there was even some trick to it...”

Oniisama smiled helplessly at me.

“By the way, I hear a little friend of yours is coming over to stay?”

“Yes. Sawarabi Mao-chan is attending the primary section of Suiran. She is the most adorable thing!”

Mao-chan’s parents had already approved of her coming over to play, and we got permission from her to sleep over as well. She was ecstatic about it.

“I see. You must be looking forward to it. If I remember correctly, she’s the niece of the Ichinokura family’s Haruto-san?”

“She is. It seems you know of Ichinokura-sama as well, Oniisama.”

“Mmn. I’ve met him a few times, you know? He thanked me because you looked after Mao-chan at a party.”

“I see~ The one being looked after was actually me, though. Remember those times he took me out to eat?”

“Ahh, come to think of it he did.”

“I actually have a request for you, Oniisama. Remember how you promised to take me to the aquarium? I was thinking that since Mao-chan was coming over, we might as well do then. Would that be a problem?”

“I’m fine with it. Then we’ll go on the day that Mao-chan comes over. Since we’re bringing her along, would somewhere closer-by be okay?”

“Yes! Mao-chan will love it!”

Uhuhu, I couldn’t wait. I think I’d keep this a secret from her until the day.

I decided that I was going to skip cram school on the day Mao-chan came over, Naturally I would be skipping my morning jog that day too.



Lately I was jogging every morning at the park with Mihara-san. I could run a little smoother and a little longer now. I had asked him not to keep shouting my name, but he still shouting “Ojousama!” which was making me rather conspicuous. Sometimes while I was running, people I didn’t recognise at all would shout “Do your best, Ojousama!” and cheer me on. I was getting the strange feeling that I had turned into some kind of attraction for this park...

“You’ve gotten a lot more comfortable with running, Ojousama! Let’s aim for the Imperial Palace before your summer break ends!”

“Ehh!? The Imperial Palace!? Impossible! That is impossible for me!”

Weren’t all the people running there pretty much athletes? Whoa, whoa, I ran slower than people walked. If I went there I would stand out like a sore thumb.

“Ojousama, you must set your goals high. Don’t worry, a lap around the Palace is only 5 kilometres. We’ll begin training you for it now!”

“Ehh!? Now!? You are going to suddenly add 2 kilometres to my run!?”

“You can do it, Ojousama. We’ll train every day, and next year we’ll go to Honolulu!”

“Ehhhhhhh? Honolulu!?”

That was actually impossible now! Just how many kilometres would I have to run in the Honolulu Marathons!?

“Don’t give up before you run!” he cheered.

“Show me the hard work you need to defeat the weakness of your self!” he cheered.

Trying to persuade Mihara-san was actually even harder than running.

Mao-chan and her Okaasama appeared on my doorstep with her luggage.

“Gokigen’yoh, Reika-oneesama! Please look after me today.”

Mao-chan gave a slightly nervous but happy bow.

“Welcome, Mao-chan. I will be in your care as well.”

“Reika-san, my daughter will be in your care.”

“I am afraid we do not have much to offer her here, but I will definitely look after her so please be at ease.”

That was when Okaasama came along to greet them as well.

“My, Sawarabi-sama, Gokigen’yoh. It seems that your daughter will be staying with us tonight.”

“Gokigen’yoh, Kisshouin-sama. My daughter will be troubling you tonight. Please take care of her.”

“Please take care of me,” bowed Mao-chan.

“My, what a cute daughter you have.”

It seems that Okaasama had already taken to her. After we all chatted for a bit, Mao-chan’s Okaasama went home so I led Mao-chan to my room.

“Mao-chan, will you be lonely without your Okaasama?”

“I’ll be fine. Waaah! Your room is so cute, Reika-oneesama!”

Mao-chan eyed my canopied bed with sparkling eyes. She began a happy exploration of my room.

I had already stored the weird stuff like my hula hoop or my stepping machine in the storehouse so I was okay wherever she looked.

I hoped this was going to be a fun stay over.

Mao-chan, let’s make some nice memories this summer!

Okaasama began to talk about wanting to bring Mao-chan shopping. She had found a new dress-up doll...

Okaasama, please spare her hair at least! *Ruuuuuun*, Mao-chaaaaan!

## Chapter 138

Mao-chan had been hesitant but Okaasama had half forced her to accept, so in the end Mao-chan turned into her dress-up doll.

“Sorry, Mao-chan...” I apologised as Okaasama was happily choosing dresses.

I was used to it, but I’ll bet Mao-chan wasn’t.

“No, I’m fine with it, but is it really okay to buy me something? I’m starting to feel really shameless... Okaasama might get angry at me...”

“No, that is not something you need to be worried about. In fact I should be apologising for forcing you to go along with my mother’s fun. I will make sure to speak to your parents, do not worry. And perhaps you should try to at least let her know which you like. If not, she will choose everything on her own.”

“Okay.”

Mao-chan was still a little hesitant at first, but before long she was happily trying on this and that for Okaasama. As I watched I started to want to choose clothes for her too, and in the end I joined in. Could you blame me? Mao-chan was just so cute that everything looked good on her!

The one that they settled on was a cute lemon yellow party dress, with a wide, light skirt.

“Cute! It suits you so well, Mao-chan!” I clapped, causing Mao-chan to thank me shyly.

What *I* had picked for her was a white flower-patterned summer dress. It was maidenly and very cute too!

Mao-chan wore the white dress out of the store. Okaasama looked a little dissatisfied about that but the party dress was too fancy to walk about in, so there wasn’t any choice. But Mao-chan’s next words cheered her up right.

“Do you think it would be okay if I wore that dress to the summer party this year?”

Sorry that you had to worry about her feelings, Mao-chan.

Then Okaasama brought her to a hair salon and curled her hair. Uwaahh!

She had turned into me in miniature. The two of us stood in front of the mirror like sisters with perfect curls.

I was genuinely apologising to her in my mind but...

“It’s like I’m a *princess*!”

Mao-chan seemed overjoyed.

“I’ve always adored your hair, Reika-oneesama. I thought you looked just like a princess from a fairy tale,” she said as she happily touched her own hair.

Mao-chan kept glancing back to her reflection in the mirror. Eh? She actually thought that?

Apparently I had gained a successor to the Rococo Queen throne.

After a visit to a tea shop and then some more shopping and whatnot we returned home to find Otousama coming back with a cake. The tanuki had literally no other ideas for gifts to women except sweets. It was no wonder he was tubby if food was all he could think of.

I was a little worried because Mao-chan was on a diet but she was kind so she thanked him with a smile. What a good kid...

After an enjoyable dinner where we asked Mao-chan about her school life, the two of us returned to my room and relaxed.

Mao-chan seemed interested in my needle felting things, so I told her about what I was making for the school festival and then showed her the photos and the sketchbook.

“Waah! These are so good! Did you draw these, Reika-oneesama.”

“No, it was my Oniisama that drew these.”

“Your Oniisama is amazing at drawing. Ah! This one is wonderful too. Waah... Hm? Huh? What’s this one...?”

What? Ahh! That was the one that *I* drew!

“Ummm, what is this...?” she asked me awkwardly.

“Ah, that was the one that I tried using my left hand to draw. I wanted to see how well I could do it.”

“Wow, is that what this was!? No wonder it looked so strange. But if you drew this with your left hand then aren’t you pretty talented?”

“My, hohoho...”

Can I cry?

I hurriedly put the sketchbook away and decided to help Mao-chan with her summer homework instead.

“The truth is I haven’t done it at all...”

“Truly? Then shall we work hard at it together?”

“Yes!”

Teaching Mao-chan how to do her homework. The ‘oneesan feeling’ I got was amazing. She was so cute. If only she really was my little sister.

A while later Oniisama came back from work and popped into my room.

“Good evening, Mao-chan. I’m Reika’s brother, Kisshouin Takateru. It’s nice to meet you.”

“My name is Sawarabi Mao! I’ll be intruding tonight!” she replied with a bow.

I always wondered this but even though Oniisama always worked so late, how come Otousama could always come home early? Wasn’t he pushing all the work onto Oniisama?

Oniisama spent a bit of time in my room, kindly helping Mao-chan with her homework before heading back to his own room.

After some more homework the night was getting late so I thought it would be good to prepare for bed. Mao-chan was really excited to try the canopy bed. I was fine as long as she was happy, but if you slept in one each day it took surprisingly little time to get bored of it. It got dusty too, you know?

The two of us climbed in next to each other.

“Sorry for treating you like a doll today, Mao-chan. It must have been tiring.”

“No. I had a really good time.”

I had planned to played more with her, but the unexpected Okaasama attack threw the schedule off course. Honestly!

But Mao-chan said that she had fun. I asked a little more and found out that her grandparents and relatives had come over again this summer. They had only paid her brother heed again and she was feeling a little lonely because of it.

So that’s how it was. They might have been annoying, and swarmed her with attention, but I suppose my parents were of at least a little use. I guess it was okay then.

But I went to sleep next to her with thoughts of tomorrow on my mind. Tomorrow was going to be mine turn to play with her.

—At least that’s what should have happened but there was another assault in the form of Ririna. For whatever reason she came to visit the following day.

“Reika-san! Good news! I’ve come over to play!”

Uh, nobody asked you to. Look. Mao-chan has no idea why you’re here.

“Oh? Who’s this girl?”

Ririna stared without restraint at Mao-chan who was doing needle felting next to me.

“Her name is Sawarabi Mao-chan, and is something like a cute little sister to me,” I said to look out for her, “She goes to Suiran in the primary section. Mao-chan, sorry for surprising you. This girl is Kotou Ririna, my younger cousin.”

“Sister...?”

Ririna’s eyebrow twitched.

“Sister...”

Ririna looked back and forth between us unhappily, and Mao-chan seemed frightened of her. It was situations like this that I had to tell her off!

“Ririna.”

“Mao!”

I was about to chide her when she suddenly stepped forward, pushed me aside, and put her hands on her hips.

“Y-Yes...?”

“So your name is Mao. Very well! From today onwards you have the privilege of being my little sister!” Ririna announced.

“Eh!?” Mao-chan exclaimed.

“*Haaah!?*” I blurted.

It was so shocking that I couldn’t help myself. Making Mao-chan her little sister!? What the hell was she on about!?

“Ummm...”

“If you’re Reika-san’s sister, then you’re as good as mine. Call me Ririna-oneesama from today onwards!”

“Eh... Ririna... oneesama...?”

Ririna gave her a contented nod.

“Wai-, Ririna...”

“So you’re from our primary section, Mao. I see, and you’ve come over today to play? Wai-, you’re staying over!? Then I’ll stay over too.”

I called out to stop her but the conversation was progressing quickly without me. Before I knew it, the two of them were really getting along. Wai-, and it was settled that Ririna would be staying over too!?

Just like I had yesterday, Ririna was enjoying the feeling of being an oneesan. She told Mao-chan that she would teach her, and then began helping her with homework. I was about to stop her but Ririna was surprisingly good at teaching. And she was smart, too. I casually asked Ririna how she was doing in her exams only to find out to my shocking truth that she ranked 20th in her last one!

“Wahh! You’re so smart, Ririna-oneesama!”

“20th place isn’t much. I actually dropped ranks compared to my mid-terms.”

I had lost... Mao-chan’s eyes were filled with complete respect for Ririna. I quietly left the room.

“Oh? What’s up, Reika? Where’s Mao-chan?” asked Oniisama.

Today was his day off, so he had just been leaving his room in preparation to go out. I answered him with a glum face.

“Ririna came over...”

“Ririna?”

After a quick peek into my room he muttered “I see.”

Even from outside, I could hear their excitedly voices.

“So Ririna stole Mao-chan from you.”

“Yes...”

“Well, just try to have fun, the three of you. When I’m back I’ll join in.”



“Truly!?”

Oniisama was going to come home early then. I saw Oniisama out and then headed back to the storehouse by myself.

The other day I discovered something terrifying when I came in here to store my hula hoop. There was a large wooden box in the back of the room. Out of curiosity I opened it up,

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Inside was a bobcut Japanese doll in a red Kimono.

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“Gyaaaaaahhh!” I had screamed.

I hated dolls. Worse yet, it turned out to be one of those mechanical chahakobi dolls that could walk and carry tea. Despite knowing better, I wound up the spring and it began walking my way with clattering noises. *Scaary!* Dolls were scary already, but dolls that could move on their own were too much!

Behind me was an antique hinamatsuri doll whose hair grew. In front of me was a creepy chahakobi doll who could move. Had that happened at night my hair would have turned white from the fright.

I had quickly returned the doll into its box and then made my escape from the storehouse. All while trembling at the worry of those dolls visiting me in the night...

Now was the time to reawaken her.

I took the chahakobi doll out of the storeroom and began winding up the spring. When it was ready, I put it down in the gap between my opened door and the doorframe.

It didn't take long before the whole house heard the screams of Ririna and Mao-chan. Uhehehehe. This was punishment for taking away my position as oneesan~

Afterwards, Ririna furiously demanded to know what the hell I thought I was doing, and I ended up apologising over and over as Mao-chan was half in tears.

Later at night when Oniisama was back, the four of us played games like cards and jenga. It was nice having the numbers for things like these.

My bed wasn't huge so I told Ririna so many times to go sleep in the guest room, but she wouldn't budge and kept saying that she was going to sleep with us as well. In the end the three of us ended up glued to each other in bed. Cramped...

When Ririna heard about Mao-chan's family situation she was infuriated.

“What's wrong with them! That's so exasperating! You should have just come clear and given them a good telling off!”

“But...”

“Ririna, Mao-chan is not like you. She is a gentle girl,” I objected.

“Hmph. Then if she isn’t going to tell them off she should just snatch the heirship off her brother. Show everyone just how much better she is. Huhuhu, fool brother. You’ll rue the day you made an enemy of us.”

“Eh... Umm, I don’t hate my little brother or anything... And I don’t really want the heirship either.”

“Really?” asked Ririna.

“Yes,” replied Mao-chan.

That’s right. That’s because Mao-chan was the successor to the Rococo throne instead.

“Huh. Then all you have to do is start laying the groundwork so that you can marry the man you want when the time comes.”

“Where did marriage come from.” I commented.

The conversation was making so many leaps that I couldn’t keep up.

“Obviously because if we don’t pay attention we’ll end up in some political marriage chosen by our parents. If she already has somebody she likes then she has to start planning now.”

“Hahh... You are still just a child and you already think about these things?”

“Of course I’m thinking about these things. I’m an only child so I *have* to get married. *You’re* being too carefree, Reika-san. You never think about anything, do you.”

“...Sorry.”

That night I realised that for all that she acted spoilt, Ririna had a serious side to her that was already prepared to take a husband.

I only ever thought about how I would live my life after my family fell to ruin, but if I continued on the way I was would I eventually end up in an arranged marriage as

well...?

No, no, I had to marry for love. Ririna was right, I had to start preparing! Not that I had a partner in mind, though!

While I was muttering to myself, Ririna and Mao-chan had fallen fast asleep,

I had once heard that sleeping in a symmetrical pose made you more prone to sleep paralysis. As Ririna slept soundly, I gently moved her arms and legs so that they matched.

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*A chahakobi doll is a traditional mechanical doll powered by varying mechanisms, designed to carry tea to somebody, stop, and then turn around and leave, a prestigious luxury toy for its high complexity.*

## CHAPTER 139

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On the last day of Mao-chan's stay with us, we were taking her to the aquarium. The place we chose was the Hakkeijima Sea Paradise.



*The aquarium in the Hakkeijima Sea Paradise contains over 500 different varieties of fish with more than 100,000 sea creatures in all. It is one of the largest Aquariums in Japan.*

“A romantic play-island!” was the catchphrase for the place, which felt like it was picking a fight with me. As the Chief of the Forever Alone Village, I wasn't exactly happy about it.

Mao-chan had a man in Yuuri-kun. When I met them at the summer party last year I had noted to myself how heartwarming it was to watch the two of them, but you know, sometimes I was just a *liiittle* jealous of them.

But the real problem was Ririna. *Ririna*. That incredibly spoilt and wilful girl. But last night one thing led to another and Ririna casually dropped the massive bombshell that a number of boys had already confessed to her. It was like my entire world-view had been turned on its head. Shock! *Ririna* had been confessed to!? And *more than once*!?

A mindblowing reveal from the girl I had under-evaluated as being a fellow loner in romance.

It had been so shocking that I was flustered and didn't know what to say when Ririna looked at me strangely and put the nail in my coffin.

“What? By the time we're in high school, pretty much everyone's been confessed to

once or twice, right?”

*Nooooo! Not right! Nobody's confessed to me even onceee! Even if you add in my past life, not even onceee!*

Whether in studies or in romance, Ririna had crushed me in every contest—

She was just a Ririna! A *Ririna!*

Dark emotions seethed inside like volcanic fumes, but I put a lid on it and greeted Ririna and Mao-chan with a smile. Since Mao-chan asked for it, I began to brush her hair.

Mao-chan would be heading home after this so we loaded her bags into the car, and then it was off to the enemy island!

Being summer break and all, the aquarium was packed with people. If we weren't careful we could get separated. The tiny Mao-chan in particular warranted special care. I decided to hold her hand.

“Mao-cha-”

“Mao, hold my hand so you don't get lost.”

“Yes, Ririna-oneesama.”

The two held hands in comfortable companionship and then entered the aquarium without another thought. Leaving me behind.

...That was fine. I had Oniisama. Right, Oniisama? Oniisama, please stop playing with your phone and pay me attention.

Mao-chan's favourite attraction had been the beluga whales. I on the other hand had always loved polar bears. Bears that were white. They were so cute, weren't they. I had postage stamps of them too.

After last night's games, Mao-chan had opened up to Oniisama. Today they were hitting it off, and she was calling him Takateru-niisama now. Having been demoted to

‘Ojisama’, I bet Ichinokura-san would be pretty devastated if he learnt that Oniisama had taken the ‘-niisama’ title...

The underwater glass tunnel with the dolphins had been nice.



We spent a while just watching the dolphins from there. Just the scenery made you forget about the heat outside. Still, white bears took the cake for me.

After enjoying every bit of the aquarium, we left for downtown Yokohama as we discussed the idea of going to the aquariums in Osaka or Okinawa next time. Right now though, we were going to eat and shop.

“I invited somebody else with some free time today, so mind waiting a little bit?”

Somebody else? *Gasp*. Don’t tell me you’re introducing a girlfriend, Oniisama!

“Ah, see? Here he comes.”

Somebody was waving to us as they came down from the other end of the street.

“Imari-sama!?”

Wahh! It had been so long. Whao, that cool guy aura was amazing as always.

“Don’t just summon me out of the blue.”

“As if you were doing anything.”

“Wow, you’re rude.”



After a bit of friendly verbal sparring, Imari-sama flashed us a friendly smile.

“It’s been a while, Reika-chan. And I don’t think I’ve met these two before. I’m Monozono Imari. For whatever reason, I’ve been friends with Takateru here since primary.”

“I’m Taka-niisama’s cousin, Kotou Ririna.”

“Nice to meet you! I’m Sawarabi Mao!”

“Nice to meet you,” he said as she shook hands with them both.

“Ah,” he said, “Something for the girls. Here. Salt and butter. Great for warding off heatstroke, you know?”

What he handed us were nice caramel sweets from a French store well known for it. They were over 150 Yen each. I expected no less from Imari-sama. I tried one of the red-wrapped caramels and a fruity flavour spread through my mouth. Yummy!

“Won’t they melt in this heat?” asked Oniisama.

“We’ll try not to walk outside then. I hate the heat,” Imari-sama replied.

Imari-sama guided us into a shopping centre. I thought it might be boring for him to wait while us girls shopped, but instead he played along with a smile, mentioning that something suited us, or that we looked cute in something else.

When we went up the escalators he even casually took Mao-chan’s hand, who ended up completely entranced by him. It’s terrible, Yuuri-kun! You’ve even got rivals *here!*

When we went accessory shopping I found this lovely glass hair ornament that chimed when you move your head.

“Wah! Those are so magical,” exclaimed Mao-chan as she looked at them.

They came in different colours too, so Imari-san asked which she liked.

“You two are fond of this one? In that case I’ll make them a commemoration present for all three of you.”

Ehhh!?

At first we tried to refuse, but Imari-sama's tongue was so smooth that we ended up obliging before we knew it. Mao-chan went with pink, I went with red, while Ririna went with blue. Imari-sama personally helped Mao-chan put hers on, so she was completely captivated by him. Uwawawa, but Imari-sama really *was* dreamy!

I was watching him when Ririna tugged on Mao-chan's sleeve and brought her to a corner.

"That gentleman is dangerous, so you can't fall in love with him," she warned.

What on earth are you doing, Ririna.

Suddenly, I happened to hear Oniisama's conversation with him from behind us.

"You know, if you keep doing stuff like this, somebody is going to end up stabbing you again."

...Eh?

Apparently Ririna had quite an eye for things.

In the evening we dropped Mao-chan and Ririna off at their houses. The three of us entered returned to my home, but after a while Oniisama and Imari-sama went out again.

Since I was tired from having fun all day, I opened the door to my room only to meet with the bobcut doll from yesterday, clattering and walking my way.

Today was the firefly catching party, hosted by the Kaburagi family. It was being held in a Japanese-style garden at their hotel. Okaasama had excitedly dressed me in a kimono. It was made from blue-green silk, and looked suited for the summer. Otousama had said something or other about Okaasama looking beautiful in her deep

purple kimono.

We arrived on scene, and greeted the Kaburagi couple before doing the same to some of the acquaintances closer to our family. All of the walking around had tired me, so after the greetings were done I went to look for a seat.

That was when somebody held a drink out to me.

“Here.”

“Enjou-sama.

“Good evening, Kisshouin-san.”

So he was here too...

“So you’re wearing a kimono today. It really suits you, you know.”

“Thank you very much.”

I looked around for anybody else when he gave me some rather misinformed help.

“Masaya is over there.”

“I was not particularly searching for Kaburagi-sama.”

“Oh, okay then. I just thought that you’d want to greet him as the son of the hosts, that’s all.”

What, are you trying to say that I don’t have manners or something?

The party had already started, so the night garden was filled with flying fireflies.

“Wanna go look?”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Since I was already here, I did want to. Then again, they had said all that stuff about Tamakazura hadn’t they. And I was wearing a kimono too. I’d hate for anything weird to happen because of this.

“Masaya seems to be going over, so let’s head over too.”

“...All right.”

I already told you I don’t care about Kaburagi.

Countless fireflies were flying in the garden. The way they floated around the guests looked like something out of a fantasy. Uwahh! How dream-like!

I tried to approach them too, but the fireflies floated away. Huh?

I approached. They ran. I approached again. They scattered to run away.

...This was weird. I knew there were chrysanthemum-based insecticides, but the perfume on my kimono was absolutely not that. Why.

“Goodness! Maihama-san seems so popular!” somebody exclaimed.

I looked over to find the fireflies gathering around Maihama-san, turning her into a modern day Tamakazura.

When she noticed that all of them had avoided me, Maihama-san began to chuckle.

I lost...

The role of Tamakazura for this chapter went without a doubt to Maihama-san.

Stop laughing, Enjou! You’re standing right beside me! How do we know it wasn’t you!?

At that moment, the President of the Pivoine, Youko-sama, appeared on scene with a photogenic smile, other Pivoine members in tow.

Oh dear. I had a bad feeling about this...

## CHAPTER 140

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*Mushi mezuru himegimi, or The Lady who Loved Insects (虫めづる姫君), is the twelfth-century Japanese tale of one who defies social convention and breaches the decorum expected of a Heian court lady.*

*The protagonist befriends insects, names her attendants after them, and engages in poetic exchanges involving furry caterpillars, leading to laughter on the part of others. Portrayed as even more eccentric is her disregard for her physical appearance: she leaves her hair untrimmed; has unplucked eyebrows; neglects to blacken her teeth; and allows herself to be seen by men.*

*Donald Keene has suggested that, while the reader may be attracted by her independence of mind, the author was probably trying to satirize those with eccentric behaviour and unconventional tastes*

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“Gokigen’yoh, Enjou-sama, Reika-sama.”

The President and her followers greeted us as they came our way.

“The fireflies are splendid, aren’t they? It truly transports you to another world,” murmured the President as she gazed out over the garden.

I couldn’t help but give a self-depreciating comment.

“It would be nice if they flew a little closer though...”

I heard Enjou stifle a laugh in the background. Stop laughing! We still haven’t established whose fault this was!

“Perhaps. But who is to say that the loveliest view isn’t from here?”

As expected of the President. What a great way of putting things!

“Kisshouin-san,” said Enjou, “If you really wanted to see them up close, shall I go catch one for you?”

“...Just the thought is enough, Enjou-sama.”

Your eyes are totally laughing at me, Enjou. Who knew he was so easily amused.

I heard people laughing melodiously from Maihama-san's direction. Surrounding Kaburagi, and Maihama-san next to him, were countless fireflies floating about.

"Look, Masaya-sama! The fireflies are...!" she exclaimed proudly, trying to stress that it was like the two of them were being blessed as a couple.

Why were all the fireflies gathering around such a noisy person? Had she prepared some kind of bug attractant?

In contrast to her high spirits, Kaburagi seemed expressionless and gloomy. Being popular had its own troubles, didn't it.

"The young miss besides Kaburagi-sama... Maihama-san, was it? From Yurinomiya..."

The President's gaze turned sharp.

"Yes, Youko-sama. She has intruded on our school a few times."

"Some of the students at Yurinomiya called her the Queen."

The words of the Pivoine member shocked me. The Queen of Yurinomiya!? I had thought she was some small fry but she was ruling as the Queen of Yurinomiya!?

"Goodness..." the President smiled sweetly.

Her eyes weren't smiling at all.

They wouldn't say anything rash with Enjou here, but I was already looking for a path to retreat.

But, tired of dealing with Maihama-san, Kaburagi suddenly spotted his best friend and came over.

"So here you were, Shuusuke."

"Oh? Were you looking for me?"

"Kaburagi-sama, thank you very much for inviting us today," thanked the President as

our representative.

The rest of us began to follow suit. Kaburagi exchanged a few words with us before telling Enjou that he had something he wanted to talk about. He obviously just wanted to escape from Maihama-san.

“Let’s talk inside then,” agreed Enjou.

The two of them tried to leave but Maihama-san stubbornly followed after.

Or at least she tried, but Enjou gently rejected her.

“We just want to speak alone for a little bit, so do you think it would be possible to just give us a bit of time?”

“You won’t see these fireflies every night. Try and enjoy yourself,” added Kaburagi.

With that, this time they really did leave her to head inside. A splendid escape, Kaburagi.

Now that we had nobody we needed to watch our words around, the atmosphere exploded in tension. Maihama-san wasted no time in beginning her attack on me.

“Goodness, Reika-san. I saw you earlier. It must be so pitiful that even the fireflies won’t pay you attention. What a shame that you couldn’t become Tamakazura tonight.”

So she *was* listening that time with Mrs. Kaburagi... Maihama-san’s face as she glared at me was a sight to behold.

“My! Reika-sama is unlike a certain somebody who the fireflies pay any attention to. I must say, you reminded me less of Tamakazura, and more of the Lady who Loved Insects. For one thing those are quite the eyebrows you have,” retaliated the President before I got a word in.

“Hohoho,” laughed the other girls.

“The Lady who Loved Insects!? That’s quite a rude thing to say,” Maihama-san glared at the President.

The President smiled, unbothered.

“I suppose it might be. Perhaps we shall say that the *insects* were simply attracted to Kaburagi-sama’s brilliance instead. Watching the two of you made me think of a bug zapper. My, that’s a beautiful dress you have on. Let me guess, inspired by the Japanese Moon Moth?”

“Wha-...! Hmph! If I’m a moth, I suppose that makes you the carnivorous plants trying to eat me. How *scary*! I’d better get Masaya-sama to protect me!”

“Hohoho, it’s a shame then that Masaya-sama won’t pay you attention at all.”

“Is that something you lot should be saying? Even though you’re in the same school, and some in the same year, no matter how much time passes you still seem to be just part of the crowd to him.”

Maihama-san had quite some guts to pick a fight with her...

From a distance it might have looked like two young girls chatting amicably, but in truth they were trying to kill each other verbally.

“Unfortunately for you, Reika-sama over here is close enough that Kaburagi-sama played a song on the piano for her. That Chopin piece was wonderful, Reika-sama.”

“Eh!? Ah, yes-!”

Uwah, you’re throwing me onto the frontlines too!? My hair was tied up to match my kimono though, so my offensive power is reduced by 20%, you know? And my sword is made of foam.

“Kaburagi-sama played the Fantasia Impromptu and the Minute Waltz for her. His rendition of the Turkish March was wonderful too.”

Ah! She casually added in the songs played for Mao-chan too!

“Oh...? I see. Then perhaps I should ask him to play me some piano as well.”

“Perhaps you should. Whether he’ll agree is a different matter, though.”

S-, Scary... The exit strategy! What’s the exit strategy!?

And even though it was all the President and Maihama-san talking, why was it that



Maihama-san was staring venomously at *me*!?

Their battle continued for a while longer, until Maihama-san left.

The President gazed at her leaving.

“That girl is quite unrestrained in Yurinomiya, you know. Putting on the airs of a Queen and telling her followers to isolate those that she doesn’t like,” she commented, “Using a group of people to isolate a single girl. You can tell what kind of person she is just from that.”

“I feel sorry for the girls of Yurinomiya, to have people like those in charge.”

Eh... Is that something *you* girls can be saying?

‘One man’s fault is another man’s lesson.’

People in the past said really wise things, didn’t they.

I gazed at the fireflies in the garden and brought my thoughts elsewhere. It would have been nice to see them from closer.

Suddenly my arm felt itchy, and I realised a mosquito had bitten me. The fireflies avoided me, but the mosquitoes were okay? What was the meaning of this.

I wasn’t allowed to scratch it despite how itchy it was, so I used my nails to carve a cross on it. So itchy! I had better go to a dermatologist tomorrow.

“Protecting the members of the Pivoine is my duty as the President. Reika-sama, if anything happens with Maihama-san, come and tell me immediately. I’ll always be on your side.”

“Thank you very much...”

No matter what, I’d never tell her a thing. Just thinking about a battle between Suiran and Yurinomiya was scaring me.

“Uhuhu.”

“Hohoho.”

We laughed into the night.

The next day Enjou had sent me a bug cage with a single firefly inside. During the day, the firefly was just some black bug.

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Japanese Moon Moth:



## CHAPTER 141

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It was a bit of a shame that the firefly only had the lifespan of a week. I couldn't bring myself to have it spend the rest of its life in a cage so I decided to let it out in the Suiran Forest. To be honest I had actually wanted to show it to Mao-chan. Ah well, I was sure there would be another opportunity.

Anyhow, that was how I found myself at school during the summer holiday. I opened the cage and I thought it was going to fly away, but it just landed on a nearby bit of grass and stopped moving.

...Don't tell me it was it dying already!?

I picked up a stick and poked at it only for it to fly off and land on another blade of grass. Apparently it wasn't dying, it was just taking a rest. Die well, firefly!

I left the forest after cheering it on in my heart.

Places with vegetation really were cooler, it seems. The moment I left the forest I was assaulted by a wave of heat. Shielded from the glare by my parasol I lightly jogged for the school building. Those athletics clubs members really impressed me with how they trained in this heat. I hoped they watched out for heat stroke.

After entering the school I was cooling down in the hallway when Class Rep and Iwamuro-kun came along.

"Oh? Kisshouin-san, you're here today?" Class Rep asked.

"I had an errand. Are the two of you here for the remedial?"

"Mhm."

The school ran remedial classes for those who were interested. Unlike my time in middle school where I was going because of my grades dropping, these remedials were special classes for those willing to study more.

“I recall that you said Honda-san would be taking them as well?” I asked quietly.

After checking that nobody was around, Class Rep happily affirmed nodded.

“We’re even in the same class. Since Iwamuro-kun is in the class too, together with Nonose-san, the four of us are studying together.”

“My.”

It looks like the remedials are working out for you after all, Class Rep. Aren’t you making a lot of progress this summer?

“They came over and commented that the two of us seemed close with you, Kisshouin-san. Somehow it all feels like it’s thanks to you.”

Ohh? Thanks to me, is it? I didn’t actually do anything though.

“If I was of at least some help to you, then I am glad.”

“You’re my Love Guru. And Iwamuro-kun as well. The two of us get along strangely well. Right, Iwamuro-kun?”

“Guess we do.”

“I see,” I said, “I had always thought you two would.”

At first glance, Iwamuro-kun and Class Rep didn’t seem to have any similarities at all, but in truth the two were both members of the Maidens Society.

At that moment, something flew in through the window and hit me in the back of the head.

“Oww!”

Eh!? What!? Did somebody throw a rock at me!? But I could feel something on my head.

Suddenly a piercing noise like an alarm clock came from the left side of my head. Eh!? This sound was...! Don’t tell me!

“Kisshouin-san, there’s a cicada on your head!”

“Aaaaah!”

I knew it!

I *knew* it! Gross! Scary! Noisy!

The noisy cicada on the side of my head continued to “sing”. I didn’t want to touch it, just from the size alone! Dragonflies might be one thing but not cicadas!

Having lost his cool as well, Class Rep reached out for my head but he stopped when the cicada threatened him with its wings. I was frantically shaking my head left and right as well but it wouldn’t let go. In fact I caught a glimpse of it during the process, which just gave me goosebumps. Gross! Scary! Noisy! Gyaaaah!

By now I had completely lost my mind and only cared about getting rid of it. I was shaking my head back and forth like a half-crazed rock star. Leggooo!

“Please hold still for a bit!” said Iwamuro-kun before adding, “Sorry if this hurts.”

Tall as he was, he reached around me and smacked the cicada off my head with the back of his hand!

“You did it, Iwamuro-kun! Kisshouin-san, it’s gone!”

“...Ueeh!?”

I was dizzy from all the shaking but I caught sight of the cicada on the ground, lying on its back.

Maybe the smack had rendered it unconscious or something, but after laying still for a while longer it got up and flew out the window.

“Are you okay, Kisshouin-san?” asked Iwamuro-kun.

“You don’t look well. Shall we go to the nurse’s office?” asked Class Rep.

“Thank you, you two. Sorry for panicking and scaring you...”

The cicada had scared me so much that I had been screaming without thinking. I'll never be good enough to understand how Bashou-sensei can find that noise poetic... Aah, that really scared me.

“Ah! Kisshouin-san, there's a broken cicada leg in your...”

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaahgh!

After the nightmare with the cicada I immediately booked a shampoo at my hair salon for right after. I didn't explain to them why. I just asked them to give my hair a thorough washing.

After Iwamuro-kun and Class Rep got rid of the leg for me I had them make sure nothing else was weird about my hair, and asked them to keep the whole thing a secret.

“In Southern France they say that a cicada is good luck. I bet something great is going to happen!” they said to cheer me up. Do you really think so?

Then while Class Rep continued checking my hair, Iwamuro-kun said,

“If you find a reversed curl, there might be good luck for your too,” causing Class Rep to search more fervently.

Apparently he even found one. Good for him...

A few days later I visited Sakura-chan's house for the first time in a while. Since it was summer I brought her ice cream from a chocolate chain famous around the world. The strawberry flavour was rich and delicious! And the chocolate chips inside were great too!

The two of us were hanging in her room and just enjoying our ice cream as we told each other about how we were doing.

“Is Akizawa-kun not here today? Oh, club activities?”

“Yeah. Training camp, and practice matches, he's just been really busy. And he's got a

summer class at cram school too. Even though it's summer break I don't have much time with him."

"I see~"

"And speaking of Track Club! Hey, do you know that 1st year who became the manager for the club?"

"Eh? Nope. I didn't even know our track club even had a manager."

"You do. You need to pay attention to that girl for me. Managers have ulterior motives. They always do."

"Uwah, what the heck is this bias."

"Think about it. At an all-girls school like mine none of the athletics clubs have managers. At Suiran the Track Club for both the boys and the girls shares the same Manager position, but pretty much all the girls who take it act as the Manager for the boys' athletics clubs. Nobody's even heard of a girl doing it because she just loves the sport. I need to go cheer for Takumi at their next meet to stop this girl. I can't wait for the next School Festival."

"Ah well, give it your all~"

Sakura-chan's Akizawa-kun-defences were rock solid as always.

"You don't seem to care at all. Well, whatever. How about you, Reika? Anything happen recently?"

"Hmm~ Not really? Oh, I guess Maihama-san picked a few fights with me."

"Maihama? Did she do something to you?"

"Not really. At worst she badmouthed me a little, or started a row with me. For some reason she sees me a rival for Suiran's Emperor."

"Oh. Speaking of which, a little while ago I happened to overhear her talking about some girls at Suiran being eyesores and loitering around the Emperor. Don't tell me she was talking about you?"

“Huh? I don’t recall *ever* loitering around the Emperor, but...”

But that probably *was* me she was talking about. I mean, considering the way she glared at me...

“So what’s this about Maihama-san being the Queen of Yurinomiya?”

“She just pretends to be one. She doesn’t have the ability.”

“I see~”

“Are you really okay, though? If she gets too bad I’ll help.”

“Thanks, Sakura-chan. But it’s totally fine. I mean, sorry to her, but I’ve never found her scary. Like at all. I do find her annoying though.”

“That’s fine then.”

But Maihama-san, huh~ Kaburagi doesn’t seem to be interested at all, but I guess he can’t reject her too harshly thanks to Yurie-sama. Whatever happened to Yurie-sama. She wasn’t there at the firefly-catching party, and I never heard anything about her.

I wondered how things between her and Kaburagi turned out. Was Kaburagi over it yet?

He hadn’t made any progress with Wakaba-chan yet. He wasn’t going to have one more relapse into Yurie-sama was he? But then Yurie-sama was slated to go to America after she graduated from university. Hmmm...

Ah well, not like other people’s romances were anything to do with me... Tomorrow I needed to go to the library again. Sometimes I’d sit next to him and have delusions in my mind about being a high schooler couple.

This summer I had, without even realising, become a fine stalker in the making.



## CHAPTER 142

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My summer break was busy. Jogging in the early morning, going on trips, sometimes going out with my group or Sakura-chan too. Sometimes Otousama or Okaasama would drag me here or there. And then heading to the library between that. My goal there was, of course, the boy who looked like Naru-kun.

I tried to sit as close to him as possible but things didn't always work out. When it didn't I would sit somewhere else and study properly, but when a seat freed up I would move to shorten the distance.

The times when I was lucky and the seat next to him was free, I could feel my heart throbbing in excitement.

I had leered at his belongings once to see if I could get his name but it didn't work out.

I was pretty much one step away from being a stalker wasn't I? I vowed to never follow him at least. If I did that I think it would be over for me as a human being... So for now I'd stick with being a stalker in-the-making.

I didn't have much time left to make my dream come true either. What on earth was I doing...

Since my previous life, my dream was to have a date in school uniforms. Walking together in uniforms, going home together after school! And awkwardly holding each other's hands... Kyaaah!

How niiice, how cuuute~ Oh, and it would be dreamy to ride on the back of their bicycle too. Sitting sideways on the bicycle rack... Waahh!

In the past when I had ridden on the back of Naru-kun's bicycle I liked to imagine that we were lovers. Oh boy. When it came to romance I hadn't aged mentally at all, had I.

Speaking of which, when Naru-kun was in high school, I received quite a shock when I saw him walking with what seemed to be his girlfriend. When I asked my aunt about it, she said that her son was dating a girl from his school. It just left me in a slump

though. I was in primary school at the time. Aah, *curse the age difference!*

Because Obasan had told all our relatives about it, at New Years Naru-kun was teased to death by all the uncles and aunts. Large family gatherings will never stop being a bane for young people...

Anyhow, the date in school uniform. I only had about a year left with my uniform. Please, God! Grant my romance spring before then!

The President wanted to show off the Pivoine's power, so they put in extra effort for the Pivoine Summer Party this year. A result of that was an abundance of old boys and old girls in attendance. Besides the alumni were the Petite of course, and anyhow it was just a lot of people.

When I arrived I went over to greet the President.

"My, what a wonderful dress, Reika-sama. The kimono from the firefly party suited you as well, though."

"Thank you very much, Youko-sama. The way your pearls look against the colour of your dress reminds me of the moon in the summer dusk sky."

"I inherited these pearl earrings from my mother," she smiled happily.

"By the way, Reika-sama," she began, "Has Maihama-san from Yurinomiya said anything to you since then?"

"No, but thank you for your concern."

Since everybody else was arriving to greet her, I decided to take my leave. After looking around a little I spotted Sarara-sama, so I headed over with quick steps and called out to her.

"Sarara-sama, gokigen'yoh!"

"Gokigen'yoh, Reika-sama."

Although I knew she wasn't some aloof loner anymore, unfortunately I still didn't talk to her at school so much. Still, I really admired the way she firmly lived in her own world. That's why whenever we met at a party or the salon I'd take the initiative to speak to her first.

"How have you been spending your summer holiday, Sarara-sama?"

"I haven't been doing anything really worth mentioning. Although, I *did* manage to get my hands on a book that was out of print."

Ever the bookworm. She only ever brought up crazy-complicated titles. I honestly never had a clue. Usually I would just smile along.

We were still chatting when I noticed a brightly smiling Mao-chan, coming my way with Yuuri-kun in tow.

"Reika-oneesama!"

"Mao-chan! And Yuuri-kun too."

Tonight she was wearing the lemon-yellow party dress that Okaasama bought her.

"Mao-chan, you look so cute in that dress!"

"Thank you very much. Yuuri-kun complimented me too."

The two of them smiled at each other. My, what a gentleman you are, Yuuri-kun!

I'd better keep the incident with Imari-sama a secret from him.

I was listening to the pair talk about their summer holiday when suddenly things grew noisy. Eh? What was happening?

I looked towards the entrance where it was the noisiest and saw Yurie-sama being escorted in by Kaburagi. Ehhh!?

And then in behind them came Aira-sama escorted by Enjou. What was the meaning of this!?

Whether it was because she was avoiding him or simply because he was being

considerate of her, the two of them hadn't been seen together in public since that winter.

Nobody openly discussed it, but those of us in the Pivoine, and even people outside of it could more-or-less sense that something had happened between the two. And little wonder. Kaburagi who had always been by her side for one reason or another had stopped chasing after her entirely. And neither hide nor tail of Yurie-sama hadn't even appeared at the firefly-catching party.

On top of that once you consider that this all coincided with the drop in his marks pretty much everybody wanted to know what had happened. Treading clumsily around the topic would have just enraged Kaburagi though, so everybody kept their speculations silent.

That was the situation when the two of them showed up at the summer party. Everybody was focused on them.

They paid it no heed though, chatting amiably with drinks in hand as they had always done so in the past.

Before long Kaburagi whispered something in Yurie-sama's ear. After looking surprised for a moment, she smiled and the two joined the rest of the dancers doing the waltz, Kaburagi leading skilfully. His expression was gentle, and his eyes were filled with affection for her.

Could it be that Kaburagi's long-time love had finally borne fruit!? Now that he was in 2nd year, both his face and physique were mature and I could even see the two of them looking good together.

Enjou and Aira-sama joined the waltz as well, and with four of the most attractive people in Suiran dancing there, the whole hall felt dazzling and fantastical.

"It's so magical... I wish I could be down there," Mao-chan sighed dreamily.

"Then shall we dance too?" asked Yuuri-kun.

Mao-chan seemed shy so I placed my hand on her back and pushed.

As I watched Mao-chan dancing with an excited expression, I thought back to my waltz with Oniichan when I was her age.

“Are you not going to dance, Reika-sama?” asked Sarara-sama.

“Eh?”

Did she think I wished I was down there? Hmm... The waltz? Oh!

“If you wish to see me dance then I ask for the head of Jokanaan~” I said, holding out a silver platter, posing like Salomé.

“...I see,” she replied without a change of expression.

The best literary joke I could come up with was a complete dud...

I put the platter down on the table and pretended that this *hadn't* just happened.

That was when Yukino-kun came along. Ohh! An angel to save me from this awkwardness!

“Good evening, Reika-oneesan.”

“Yukino-kun!”

I was in a good mood because it had been a while since I'd seen him.

“Sarara-sama, this is Enjou-sama's younger brother, Yukino-kun!” I proudly introduced him.

“Gokigen'yoh, Yukino-san. I am Nouzen Sarara.”

“I'm Enjou Yukino. It's nice to meet you.”

His smile was so *cute*!

“You aren't going to dance, Reika-oneesan?” he asked as he watched his own brother dancing.

“Unfortunately I have no partner.”

After staring blankly at me for a moment, he burst into a bright smile.

“Then please dance with me!”

Ehhhhhhhhhh!?

“Ah, but...”

“Am I not good enough?”

Guh... Don’t look sad!

“...Then, if you are fine with me, shall I accompany you for a song?”

Yukino-kun immediately beamed, before taking my hand.

“Please!”

Sarara-sama saw us off as the two of us joined the dancers.

## CHAPTER 143

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The two of us drew circles to the music. Despite the height difference, Yukino-kun was doing his best to lead. And he was only six! What an amazing boy!

“You dance well, Yukino-kun.”

“Really? It’s not hard to dance because I’m too short?”

“Why, not at all. I happen to be enjoying myself immensely, thanks to your leading.”

“Ehehe. I’m having a lot of fun too.”

Soooo cuuuute! Dancing with an adorable little angel like this? I’m so happy!

We were moving through the hall, step after step, when I made eye contact with Mao-chan whose eyes were glittering. Then Enjou who was still dancing with Aira-sama. He looked taken aback. I was probably going to hear complaints about this later, but...

“I hope I’ll grow taller soon. I wonder if I’m this short because I hate milk.”

Yukino-kun was actually so cute that all thoughts of Enjou disappeared for the moment. To think that he was worrying about his height. He really was a boy. It wasn’t something to concern himself over at all. He was still in 1st grade so there was a lot of growing left to do. Actually, I kind of wished he’d stay cute like this forever.

His hair glowed amber in the light as I continued to follow his lead in circles around the hall.

After that one song we left the dance floor, since I had to think about his body as well.

Cheeks slightly flushed, Yukino-kun drank plum juice, while I helped myself to a non-alcoholic margarita. Yummy!

“Are you all right, Yukino-kun? Are you tired?”

“I’m fine. How about you, Reika-oneesan?”

“I still feel fantastic.”

Maybe the jogging I did over the summer was why my stamina seemed better than before. The day after tomorrow I was headed to the Imperial Palace with Mihara-san as the culmination of my summer training. I wonder if I would be okay. It was five kilometres after all. I could already see all of the real joggers looking at me like I was completely out of place.

“You know, Yukino-kun, for a 1st grader you are very good with the waltz. Did you practice a lot?”

“That’s not true. Compared to Niisama I’m not much.”

Yukino-kun watched his brother again.

“I think you were plenty skilled.”

Actually, if Yukino-kun had danced as flawlessly as Enjou, it might have been a little creepy even.

“Have you finished your summer homework?” I asked him.

“Yes. I finished most of it in July, so when I was done I stayed at a cool villa for a while.”

“Goodness, is that so! What a good boy you are!”

“It was too hot for me to go outside so I didn’t have anything else to do. Niisama helped me with the parts I couldn’t do.”

“Enjou-sama did?”

I’d been thinking this for a while now but Enjou sure was sweet on his brother.

“Yes. Although Niisama was too busy to really be around much... Oh, Niisama is coming over.”

Having finished dancing, the four of them headed our way, still the centre of attention.



“Niisama!”

“Yukino.”

With one hand Enjou signalled a waiter for a drink, while he plopped the other down on Yukino-kun’s head.

“Yukino, you haven’t been causing trouble for Kisshouin-san have you?”

“Of course not,” he sulked in offence.

Ohhh! It was rare seeing this expression on Yukino-kun. I guess he was more comfortable acting childishly when it was his older brother.

Aira-sama greeted me with a smile.

“Long time no see, Reika-chan.”

“It has been a while, Aira-sama.”

And it really had. The last time I met her face-to-face was actually during that incident with Kaburagi, right? Not that we hadn’t sent each other the occasional email.

“It’s been a while, Reika-san. Do you remember me?”

“Of course I do, Yurie-sama.”

Was there anybody who could forget as wonderful a person as her? Yurie-sama laughed gently at me.

“Yukino! How you been!” said Kaburagi before ruffling Yukino-kun’s hair.

Yukino-kun tried to swat his hands away, but his hair was already a mess, and Kaburagi was having fun holding on.

Stop it! Don’t be so rough with him, you *fool*! You’re going to snap his poor little neck!

Before I could stop him, Aira-sama and Yurie-sama delivered Yukino-kun from evil, and the two of them tidied his hair again.

“What are you doing, Masaya!” scolded Yurie-sama.

Whoo!

“Kisshouin-san, thank you for looking after my brother.”

“You mean the dance? In that case it was very much the other way around. I owe him my thanks for being considerate of a wall-flower like me.”

Whether it was Yuuri-kun or Yukino-kun, the Petite Pivoine was just filled with gentleman. Honestly, I was envious.

See? Off in the distance some primary school girls were sneaking glances our way. Apparently Yukino-kun was already incredibly popular in the primary section. I felt a little bad now for monopolising him.

Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun came over to greet Yukino-kun at those girls’ request.

“Yukino-kun? Say, how about you come talk with everybody at the Petite?”

“Okay. Niisama, I’m going.”

Yukino-kun waved goodbye and headed for his own friends.

“Had you planned on coming to this party, Aira-sama, Yurie-sama?”

I hadn’t heard a thing about that, you know.

“Youko-san invited us quite passionately, but I was still on the fence about it,” explained Yurie-sama before giving a happy smile, “But then Masaya invited me to come with him, so...”

Kaburagi invited her!? And Yurie-sama agreed... Don’t tell me his romance really bore fruit!?

Enjou gave me a helpless smile.

“I think you’re misunderstanding, Kisshouin-san.”

“Eh?”

“There’s nothing going on between Yurie and I,” said Kaburagi.

“Eh?”

This time the four of them smiled at me.

“Masaya came over, you see, and told me that he had come to terms with things. He apologised for everything, and thanked me for waiting all that time.”

Yurie-sama’s eyes seemed a little wet.

“It was my fault for not being clear with him. Because of that I hurt him so much. When I heard that he had gone to Toujinbou, and then again when he went to the Sea of Trees, each time it felt like I was being gutted. I wasn’t sure I was alive...”

Her hands began to tremble, like she was recalling those very moments. Kaburagi’s one man heartbreak journey had caused a lot of shock for those involved, hadn’t it. You know, the destinations being what they were.

“Even when I heard that Masaya was getting a little better, I hadn’t thought I’d ever be able to face him again. I didn’t think he could forgive me. But then... Masaya came to visit me the other day...”

This time Yurie-sama had finally broken into real tears. Kaburagi looked apologetic, and handed her a handkerchief. She must have really suffered... Yurie-sama had always thought of him as her adorable younger brother after all.

This time it was Kaburagi’s turn to talk.

“It wasn’t like I didn’t know how she felt. But fourteen years of those feelings weren’t so easy to deal with... I’m sorry, Yurie.”

She shook her head to let him know it was fine.

“But I finally got over it,” he continued, “I might not love you in that way anymore, but you’ll always be special to me. That’s why if you ever need me, I’ll always come to help. No matter where you are, Yurie.”

Ah! That was the line from Kimidol.

I see. This meant he really had gotten over her then. It might have been annoying with the poem anthology and all that, but seeing all of them smile made me feel happy for them.

“Reika-san, I heard from Aira that we caused you quite a bit of trouble. Sorry. But thank you as well.”

“Oh gosh, no, I did really nothing at all.”

“Yeah,” commented Kaburagi, “The two of us just shared the pain of heartbreak.”

Oii! What the hell are you saying!

“Eh-, your heart was broken too, Reika-chan? By who!?”

“Goodness, Reika-san. It must have been rough.”

Stop! Please! Stop looking at me with pity like that! Stop asking who did it! Kaburagi, stop nodding knowingly like that, damnit!

And now Enjou was sniggering in the background, damnit! Ahhh, geez! Come back, Yukino-kun! I need your soothing angel blessings!

And so the summer break ended, and what I had to show for it were memories of finishing the Imperial Palace run, half-dead.

Today I would enter 2nd Year.

—And then that morning of the opening ceremony, an incident rocked the school.

Kaburagi and Wakaba-chan arrived at school together, chatting happily all the while.

“Reika-sama, what on earth is that supposed to be!?”

“Reika-sama! Why is Kaburagi-sama with Takamichi-san!?”

With Serika-chan shaking my left arm, and Kikuno-chan shaking my right, I was rocked too, physically.

I! Don't! Knoooooow!

## CHAPTER 144

---

Not long after the opening ceremony, the incident with Wakaba-chan and Kaburagi was the talk of the school, and already it had caused waves to spread.

Plenty of students had come to them to find out the truth, but both of them gave the same answer.

“We just met at the gates by chance.”

Whoa, whoa, you think any girl who Kaburagi just ‘met at the gates’ would be able to walk in while having a friendly chat with him?

When they pressed her further though, she said that mostly they were just talking about that last exam before the break, or about maths, or physics, and pretty much all about their little competition for better grades. Thanks to that, everybody tentatively accepted it, for now. It wasn’t a secret that Kaburagi had called out to her at the rankings boards for the term-end exams.

But you knooow... Although everybody else might have believed that Kaburagi was only interested in her as an academic rival, as somebody who had read Kimidol this whole situation just reeked of suspicion to me. As if that wasn’t enough, at the Summer Party I found out that he had gotten over Yurie-sama.

I’m pretty sure it was true. I think that waltz with her was his farewell to his first love. Even I couldn’t help but feel sad for him. I’d never experienced anything like a love of over 10 years, but it must have been hard. It wasn’t unreasonable that it took him over 8 months to get over it. He had liked her for 14 years after all. Not that I didn’t pity Yurie-sama for being wracked with guilt all that time, though.

A first crush of 14 years was pretty long though. Kaburagi must have been 2 or 3 at the time. Who knew that a 2 year old infant could even have a crush. I voiced my thoughts to Enjou and he told me that Kaburagi had just said that because that was when he first met Yurie-sama. The crush actually really began when he entered kindergarten. At least that’s what Enjou thought.

I heard that the kindergartener Kaburagi had followed her around crying “Yurie~ Yurie~” and Yurie-sama said that he was so cute that she couldn’t help but always play

with him.

Yurie-sama had been in primary, and considered him a bold but adorable little brother who adored her.

Kaburagi had been a preschooler who was glued to her, and thought of her as the girl he liked.

Despite the disparity in how they saw each other, it was still the closest they had ever been. Perhaps it might have been the happiest time in his life to Kaburagi...

Ah, but when I met them at the summer party, both of them seemed happy and well, so all's well that ends well, I supposed.

No sooner had we entered 2nd Year did they hold the election for Student Council President and Vice President. This year the strongest candidate for President was, obviously, student council member Fellow Stalking Horse.

Not only were his grades good, but he had served as the StuCo President in middle school as well. Plus, he was popular with the girls.

In the end nobody could rival him and he won the place without any trouble. And then, instead of being voted in, the President chose their Vice President from within the Student Council, and of all people Fellow Stalking Horse nominated Wakaba-chan!

Eh!? Wakaba-chan was part of the Student Council!? I mean she had great marks, so I guess it was pretty natural but... Huh.

This had never happened in the manga. Manga!Wakaba-chan was already hated by everyone by the time she entered 2nd Year, so it wasn't possible to begin with. But although some people still hated her in *this* world, she had almost no connection with the Emperor. I guess that's why she managed to join.

If you looked at it a certain way, Wakaba-chan was so talented it was almost crazy, so she would definitely help them a lot. Do your best, Wakaba-chan!

Ah... But then the Pivoine never switched presidents until the end of the year. Youko-sama wasn't stepping down any time soon. Was Wakaba-chan going to be okay...?

The 3rd years were stepping down everywhere else but it had *nooothering* at all to do with me, so I was as carefree as could be when the Club President dropped a bombshell.

"Reika-sama, would it be possible for you to take over as President of the Handicrafts Club?"

"Ehhh!? Me, the President of the Handicrafts Club!?"

The President was checking my interest. Who could have foreseen this happening.

But gosh~ *Me*? It's *me*, you know? The girl who was stuck as a provisional member until last year, you know? Still the least skilled member of the club, you know?

"I... Although I enjoy handicrafts, I lack much knowledge and I only recently became a full member. Would it not be pushing it to have me as the President...? I can hardly see the others agreeing..."

When there were so many skilled and orthodox members of the club around, I didn't think they would agree to making a maverick like me the President.

"That's not something you need to worry about. This was something we decided on together. Everybody else wants you to be the next club president as well."

"Eh-, they said that?"

"Yes. Don't you love handicrafts? Everybody knows that you came during the summer and tried your best to help with the wedding dress."

Well, she wasn't wrong. During the summer break I tried to come here as often as possible. Even if I couldn't embroider, and was almost no use in helping with the dress, I did make some decorative roses and I helped with the clean-up.

"Compared to ability or knowledge, what I think is most important is how you feel about the Handicrafts Club. I don't think it's so easy to find somebody who loves this



club as much as you do, Reika-sama.”

“Reika-sama, we’ll all be here to support you as well, so could you please become our President?” asked Azai-san from my grade.

Before I knew it, everybody else was gathered around and asking me to be President as well.

Me, as the President of the Handicrafts Club...

“Are you... all truly fine with me...?”

“Of course!”

Everyone nodded with a smile.

Last year I was resigned to being a (provisional) member. This year I had finally become an official one. And now, to be the President of the Club...!? If this wasn’t a vigorous climb in ranks then I didn’t know what was!

“I shall do my best!” I declared, and everybody cheered and clapped.

From today onwards, I was Kisshouin Reika, President of the Handicrafts Club!

Ah. But the newest Club President hadn’t made any progress at all on her school festival submission. What to do?

“I can’t wait to see the Bea-tan doll~ Please make me really cute, okay! Bea-tan is so looking forward to this! Aa-tan is too!” came the email from Bea-tan, which just piled on the pressure...

When I tried making the face, one of the eyes half came off and turned into something from a horror movie. Dog Lover-kun could never know.

It seemed that during the summer remedials, Class Rep and Iwamuro-kun had really grown friendly with Honda-san and Nonose-san. Recently I occasionally caught sight of them together.

Apparently Iwamuro-kun liked Nonose-san. I see he still liked girls, even with his crossdressing hobbies...

Besides them, I often saw Fellow Stalking Horse and Wakaba-chan together, since they were both Student Council members. Sometimes I even saw Kaburagi casually saying hi to her.

I was in the salon when Youko-sama muttered something between sips of her tea.

“The new Student Council is going to be a problem, one way or another...”

I immediately escaped the salon to head to the Handicrafts Club.

G-, Gosh, I’m so busy now that I’m the Club President.

## CHAPTER 145

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Kaburagi had no interest in any girl outside of Yurie-sama. Unless he had some reason to, he would never speak to a girl of his own accord. Yet...

“Sup, Takamichi.”

“Ah-, hello.”

Each time he passed her in the hallway he would greet her just like that. It was like they were good friends.

What’s more, from what I heard, Kaburagi would call out to her in the same way when he came to her class to visit Enjou.

It wasn’t something that people could brush off with ‘meeting by chance’ anymore. Kaburagi wasn’t the sort to call out to a girl just because he ‘met her by chance’.

Even worse was that thanks to that, Enjou was calling out to her like a friend as well, these days. The result was that Tsuruhana-san’s No. 2 and her friends were picking on Wakaba-chan even harder now.

And my friends were all gossiping as well. Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan even asked me to ask Kaburagi about it at the salon. Ehhh~

Honestly though, what on earth happened during the summer, Wakaba-chan?

Wanting to seek refuge from the powder-keg the high school was turning into, I often hid in the Handicrafts Club or the Petite Pivoine. After school today I was heading there to meet with Mao-chan.

The weather forecasts had predicted a typhoon, and the skies were beginning to grow cloudy... I gazed out the hallway window as I headed to the Petite salon. While I was doing so I caught sight of a small crouching figure.

“Eh-, Yukino-kun!?”

Upon closer inspection I realised that it was Yukino-kun crouched in the hallway and grasping his chest painfully. I rushed over in panic.

“What’s wrong, Yukino-kun!?”

He wouldn’t answer. Yukino-kun was paler than usual, and just continued to wheeze shallow breaths.

“Is it an asthma attack!?”

Yukino-kun nodded. This was bad!

While struggling to breathe, Yukino-kun was looking through his bag for something. Huh?

What he pulled out was his inhaler. His arms were trembling and he was struggling to shake it, so I took it from him and shook it in his stead. Would this help him? He inhaled the drug with a whoosh, but his wheezing hadn’t gotten better. Maybe it wasn’t something that worked right away.

“Yukino-kun, let’s just head to the nurse’s office, okay?”

“Okay...” he quietly replied.

I held my hand out and helped him up, but he was too unsteady on his feet to walk.

“Yukino-kun!”

I quickly stopped him from falling but we wouldn’t be able to get there like this. What was I to do? I desperately searched my mind for ideas when it hit me.

“Yukino-kun! Climb onto my back!”

“...Eh...?”

I squatted down and faced my back to him. There wasn’t anything I could do except piggyback him!

“But...”

Yukino-kun was hesitant but now wasn't the time for that. His face was still as white as a sheet. Maybe the medicine had worked because he looked a little more comfortable than before but in no way did the attack look over!

“Come on, hurry!”

At my urging, he timidly let me carry him. I immediately felt the burden. He might have been thin, but he was already a 1st grader. It was heavy. Would I really be able to stand like this!?

But Yukino-kun was struggling to breathe right next to my ear. The hands around my shoulders were ice cold.

Fine! Women were all about guts! Awaken, the power of the muscles I gained during summer jogging!

Nuooooooooooooooooooooohh~!!

With Yukino-kun on my back, I stood up and steadied myself. I could do this!

“Yukino-kun, hold on tightly, okay?”

By a stroke of good luck, somebody from the Petite Pivoine had come by, so I asked them to bring our bags to Mao-chan before heading straight for the infirmary.

Gooooooooo! Show them your guts! Aim for Honoluluuuuuuuu! Uooooooooooooohhh!

I ran steadily through the hallways of the primary school building with Yukino-kun.

When we got there, the nurse immediately had Yukino-kun lie down on the bed.

“Are you all right, Yukino-kun? The nurse said that she would contact your family as well as your Oniisama so they should be here right away, all right?”

“Yes... Thank you very much... Reika-oneesan...”

Lying down made breathing harder, so right now his upper body was propped upright.

“Does it happen often? Attacks like these...”

“Today’s attack was because the typhoon’s coming...”

Apparently his asthma got worse during weather like these. It was just terrible! Typhoons came every year! Did he end up like this each and every time!?

“I’m fine,” he smiled weakly while sipping warm black tea.

He wasn’t. You *aren’t* fine, Yukino-kun!

That was when Enjou arrived.

“Yukino!”

He made a beeline for Yukino’s bed and began checking up on him.

“Did you use your inhaler?”

“Yeah...”

“A car is coming to take you to the hospital. We’ve let the hospital know already.”

“Okay...”

With Enjou’s help, Yukino got down from the bed.

“Can you walk on your own?”

“Yeah...”

Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun had brought our bags here so we brought them to the carpark to see the Enjou brothers off.

“Kisshouin-san, thank you for helping my brother. I’ll definitely repay the favour.”

“Yukino-kun is a precious and adorable kouhai of mine. Thanks are unnecessary. Please do hurry to the hospital. Could you let me know how he is tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Sorry, and thanks.”

We waved as the car drove into the distance.

“Yukino-kun looked like he was in pain...”

“Yes.”

Please let Yukino-kun get better...

The next morning, Enjou called me into the hallway. I flew through the greetings and immediately asked him about Yukino-kun.

“Enjou-sama, how is Yukino-kun doing!?”

“We’re hospitalising him just to be safe but it wasn’t too bad this time. I think he’ll be discharged tomorrow or the day after.”

“I see...”

Yukino-kun was being admitted again. Poor Yukino-kun...

“Kisshouin-san, yesterday you carried him all the way to the infirmary, didn’t you? Thank you. He must have been heavy, right? It gave me a shock when Yukino told me.”

“No, he was not particularly.”

Rising up to Mihara-san’s relentless daily training had really been worth it. My pitiful muscles had definitely shown growth. Admittedly I didn’t train my arms at all, so they were shaking with muscle pain this morning, though!

“Yukino was a bit depressed about being carried by a girl, you know.”

“My!”

I didn’t hurt his pride as a boy, did I? Speaking of which, he was worried about his height during the summer party, wasn’t he.

“Then please apologise to Yukino-kun for me.”

“Why are you apologising? I really am grateful that you went that far for him. Thanks.”

Enjou bowed to me. I quickly stopped him since I noticed pedestrians looking at us. Please give me a break here.

That was when I noticed Kaburagi and Wakaba-chan heading down our way. So the two of them had arrived to school together again.

I wonder why they had suddenly grown so close. I soooooo wanted to know...

“Do you want to know?”

“Uehh!?”

Enjou read my mind again!

“Want me to tell you? Why Masaya suddenly got closer with Takamichi-san...”

“Eh...”

It felt like Enjou’s eyes had lit up in mirth.

“No! I am fine, thank you!”

Never play with fire!

Oh boy, oh boy! That was close.

“Now, please excuse me!” I said, and headed right back to my classroom.

After all, I had to hurry to class! Today was the day we would be picking which events we would be entering for the Athletics Carnival! There wasn’t any time to concern myself with other people’s romances!

Actually, after the incident with Yukino-kun, I was feeling a little more confident now. Maybe I would enter one of the races this year.

“Reika-sama, will you be entering the costume race again?”



Yeah. Not that race.

## CHAPTER 146

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*The Tosa Nikki (Tosa Diary) is a poetic diary written anonymously by the tenth-century Japanese poet Ki no Tsurayuki. The text details a 55-day journey in 935 returning to Kyoto from Tosa province, where Tsurayuki had been the provincial governor. The prose account of the journey is punctuated by Japanese poems, purported to have been composed on the spot by the characters.*

*The Tosa Nikki is the first notable example of the Japanese diary as literature. Until its time, the word “diary” (nikki) denoted dry official records of government affairs, written by men in Chinese. By contrast, the Tosa is written in the Japanese language, using phonetic kana characters. Literate men of the period wrote in both kana and Chinese, but women typically were not taught the latter, being restricted to kana literature. By framing the diary in the point of view of a fictitious female narrator, Tsurayuki could avoid employing Chinese characters or citing Chinese poems, focusing instead on the aesthetics of the Japanese language and its poetry.*

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Around the time when each student was decided in their class which events to appear in, Iwamuro-kun wanted to talk to me.

“Actually, I’m slated to appear in the costume race again but...”

This time his class was going with Peter Pan as their theme. Wasn’t that fine? You’ll get to wear cute outfits again, you know~?

Ah, but I guess he wouldn’t have been picked for Tinkerbell...

“My class were pretty enthused about the Cinderella we did last year. That’s why they bugged me to do it this year too... I mean, I don’t mind of course but... I’ve been wondering what Nonose-san would think of that...”

Apparently this was about the maiden in love worrying about what his crush would think about his cross-dressing.

“I think Nonose-san would find it funny and have a great time.”

“Maybe. You don’t think she’d be disgusted...?”

“Then what if you just didn’t participate then?”

“...”

Ah, he was conflicted. I see, so he wanted to cross-dress that badly. There weren’t all that many chances for him to openly cross-dress after all.

“...There’s something wrong with me, isn’t there?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s weird that I have so much fun dressing like a girl...”

Iwamuro-kun’s expression was depressed. Eh!? Was he agonising over his secret hobby!?

“That is simply not true! It hardly hurts anybody so you have the right to do what makes you happy! And you do not need to worry! The world is overflowing with men who secretly wish they could try being a girl!”

“Eh? ...Really?”

“Absolutely! Please think back. Think about last year’s cross-dressing maid café. Do you not remember all of the boys who gleefully put on the maid uniforms? It was certainly not just you, Iwamuro-kun. Have you ever read Ki no Tsurayuki’s Tosa Nikki? Even a thousand years ago there was a senpai of your hobby. It is okay. You are not the only one, Iwamuro-kun. If you still feel worried then I will ask Nonose-san myself what she thinks about the cross-dresser in the race.”

“You’d do that!?”

“Yes, leave it to me. I am absolutely on your side, Iwamuro-kun.”

“Master!”

With a brighter expression than before, he told me, “Even if I end up as Wendy, I’m going to curl my wig!” before heading off.

I suppose I needed to track Nonose-san down now. Iwamuro-kun’s awakening was probably in large part due to my temptations, so I felt a kind of responsibility for him.

I found her chatting with some friends in the classroom.

“Nonose-san,” I said casually.

“Yes, Reika-sama?”

“Actually, during the Athletics Carnival, would it be possible for you to take over the class for the periods when I am participating myself? I do apologise for this. I still feel bad for the time we went on that excursion...”

“Of course it’s possible! I’ll help as much as you need me to. Please ask whatever you need!” she said.

“Reika-sama, if there’s anything we can help you with then don’t ever hesitate to ask for our help!” said one of her friends.

“Thank you. Hearing that overjoys me.”

Her friends all agreed to help. Now was time for the main topic though.

“Speaking of the Athletics Carnival, apparently in the other classes they have been having a great time forcing the costume race’s female roles onto their boys. It sounds like fun, does it not?”

“Goodness! Is that’s what they’re doing!?”

“Actually, the class I was in last year had a boy who played Cinderella. That was a great time.”

“Huh. Ahh! Wasn’t it Iwamuro-kun that did that?” she said as her face lit up in remembrance.

“Why yes, it was. Iwamuro-kun is a diligent person so he truly gave the role his all. Because of that, I think the costume was very polished.”

“It was, wasn’t it. I feel a bit bad but I was dying from laughter as well. Who could have imagined that huge frame in a dress... Haha,” she chuckled.

At the very least, Nonose-san didn’t seem to be disgusted. Alright!

“Say, Nonose-san? Could I speak to you for a moment?”

She followed me away from her group of friends.

“The truth is, Iwamuro-kun is cross-dressing again for the costume race this year.”

“Eh, really?”

“Yes. Although the details are being kept hush-hush until the day, that is what I was told.”

“Huuh~ Iwamuro-kun is cross-dressing again. Maybe I should tease him about it later.”

“The issue is that the person himself is a little worried about how others will see him.”

“Gosh. He shouldn’t have any reason to worry at all. I actually really *want* to see it again.”

“I thought you would say that! Then please tell him that as well! Let him know that you look forward to it.”

“I will then. Maybe if the circumstances permit I’ll get a photo to commemorate it too. But huh, cross-dressing again. Maybe our class should do something like that too.”

Incidentally, my class had decided on ‘The Town Musicians of Bremen’ for our costume race, with the competitors dressed as different animals.

And as for why it ended up as ‘Town Musicians of Bremen’, thanks to my mouse and sheep costumes last year everybody had this weird idea that I liked costumed animals. That’s why they, in a show of misguided consideration, decided to try and put in as many animals as they could for me.

Hold on guys, I don’t actually have much interest in costumes. I just wore those because I had to.

Anyway, although they had chosen that theme for my sake I firmly rejected it. As for my reason...

“Last year Kaburagi-sama cautioned me for my lax attitude in failing to wear a nose. But running while trying to breathe in that would be too much for me...”

Just bringing up his name had caused an immediate effect. As expected of the Emperor.

But after that they stressed to each other that ‘the Emperor is fussy about noses’ and began preparing them for the costumes. Oh boy~

At any rate that was what was happening with my class as a whole, but right now I was talking to Nonose-san about Iwamuro-kun. I brought up the idea of having her help me with Iwamuro-kun’s transformation.

“Last year I gave Iwamuro-kun help with make-up and his clothing. I must admit I had a lot of fun.”

“Really!? That sounds so fun!”

“Well, this year pretty much everybody in his class is helping him, so I am unsure how well they will take if we intrude. Still, I think just a little bit would be fine.”

“Yeah. I want to try putting make-up on Iwamuro-kun too.”

“I have no doubt that he will allow you if you but ask.”

I even managed to get her to invite Miharuru-chan and Class Pres. Gosh, what a skilled cupid I am!

Now that he was discharged and healthy, Yukino-kun gave me scented candles and towels from the UK as a thank you for carrying him to the nurse’s office.

Unfortunately he wouldn’t be allowed to participate in the athletics meet.

“Please do your best in my place. I got you the towel for when you’re training. I’d be really happy if you used it,” he told me. Yukino-kun! You’re such a good boy!

“The aromatic candles are like the ones that Niisama uses at home. They smell really nice, so I think you’ll like them, Reika-oneesan.”

The same scented candles as Enjou... I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. But Yukino-

kun had meant well by them. In that case I'd accept them gratefully.

I was going to be competing in the three-legged race with Ru'ne-chan. Last year I suffered a frustrating loss against Wakaba-chan but this year I was taking 1st place!

The two of us headed outside to train when I caught sight of Wakaba-chan being bombarded by bean bags. Don't tell me she was competing in the ball toss event? So reckless... You're going to end up black and blue, you know.

Ru'ne-chan and I began our three-legged training. While we were training I heard girls cheering from the other side. In the ring of girls were Kaburagi and Enjou, training for their own races. It was nice to know how lively they were.

The longer I practised with Ru'ne-chan, the more our breathing grew in sync. Seeing our progress, we decided to take a short break.

I immediately used the towel I got from Yukino-kun. It was a towel that he'd picked as being the softest one, so little wonder that it felt wonderful against my skin!

"Oh my. Doesn't the towel that Reika-sama is using seem to match Enjou-sama's?"

"Eh?"

Somebody with a sharp eye had noticed the towel I was using. When they brought it to attention, everybody who had been cheering for those two began to compare our towels.

"My! They really do match!"

"I know that brand! Very few shops in Japan sell it!

"Could it be that one of them had given the other as a present...?"

"No! I received this from Enjou-sama's younger brother!"

"Goodness! Even your families know each other!"

"That is not what I...!"

I tried to deny it but nobody could hear me over the noise of the girls.

Yukino-kuuuuun! It wasn't just the candles that matched!? That's something you really need to tell me in advance, okay!

Sometimes the pure and good-natured Yukino-kun would create dilemmas without knowing...

I sealed that towel away as something to only be used at home.

Ah! My Bea-tan doll hadn't progressed at all!!



## CHAPTER 147

---

*Tsukimi (月見) or Otsukimi (お月見), literally moon-viewing, also known as Jugoya (十五夜), refers to Japanese festivals honouring the autumn moon, a version of the Mid-Autumn Festival.*

*Tsukimi traditions include displaying decorations made from Japanese pampas grass (susuki) and eating rice dumplings called Tsukimi dango in order to celebrate the beauty of the moon. Seasonal produce are also displayed as offerings to the moon.*

*The shadow on the moon is said to be the result of the shade of the magic Katsura Tree, which cannot be cut down. A man being punished by the gods was sentenced to cut down a giant Katsura Tree on the moon, but it grows back and he can never leave.*

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With the Athletics Carnival coming up, as well as cram school, my after-school lessons, as well as the Bea-tan doll, each week was just swamped with things to do.

The Bea-tan doll was particularly bad. Since training for the Athletics Carnival made me so physically exhausted that I always went to bed the moment I got home. At this rate the doll wouldn't have any progress at all!

I had planned on asking the other club members for advice but they were so busy with the wedding dress and their own projects that I couldn't find the chance to. I was actually the club member with the most free time.

'I should probably help somehow~ But there just isn't much that I could do~' I had thought, but my new Vice President, Azai-san, told me,

"As the boss, all we need you to do is be our rock."

Boss... I was the boss, wasn't I? What if the day came when they all started calling me 'Boss Lady'...?

Anyway, our only male member, Minami-kun, was really proving his worth as far as the wedding dress was concerned.

"Your embroidery skills are truly remarkable, Minami-kun..." I praised him.

"I'm not that good. I've just been doing it for a long time is all..." he shyly disagreed.

No, really, he was so good that it would be fine even if he boasted about it.

“Ummm... By the way, Minami-kun. Is it true that Ririna has been calling you ‘Shop Boy’?”

“Eh-, ah, yes,” he replied as his eyes swam.

Oh my god! That idiot, Ririna!

“I must apologise. I only just heard about it. That girl has been too disrespectful of you. I will make sure to tell her off myself, so could you please forgive her? I truly am sorry.”

“No! I don’t really hate it or anything! Well, I mean I did at first but I’m actually quite fond of it now. Really.”

“Eh-, you *like* it!?”

Was Minami-kun actually some sort of masochist?!

“Ummm... Ever since Kotou-san began calling me ‘Shop Boy’ other people who never spoke to me before used that name to talk to me. I’ve made more friends thanks to that too. And before I was ‘Shop Boy’ she called me Apprentice(Minarai). My name Minami Raita can be shortened that way, right? And isn’t ‘Shop Boy’ better than ‘Apprentice’?”

“I honestly have no idea...”

“Really? I think ‘Shop Boy’ is definitely better.”

...Minami-kun, are you sure you haven’t been brainwashed? Well, as long as he was happy I suppose.

“If Ririna ever causes you trouble, please do let me know at once.”

“Gosh, she wouldn’t. Oh, but could I actually ask you one thing?”

“What is it?”

Minami-kun looked down as he fiddled with his knitting needles.

“What do you think Kotou-san thinks about boys who like handicrafts...?”

Eh...?

The towel thing had blown up even more.

“Oh yeah. Shuusuke lent me it once, and I liked it so I bought one too,” Kaburagi had said, which caused a little boom. By now pretty much all the girls in Suiran were using that towel.

I asked Yukino-kun,

“Enjou-sama uses that towel as well, does he not?”

“Did you not like it? I’m sorry... It just seemed so nice that I bought one for Oniisama as well...”

He seemed so down that I denied it in a panic.

“I liked it very much!”

Yukino-kun was kind, so it made sense that he bought one for his beloved Niisama. I guess it couldn’t be helped then...? Yeah.

More confident now after the summer, I had put my name down for the 100 metre sprint. Just like I did every morning with Coach Mihara, I made sure to stretch before I began training. Thanks to school I could only run on weekends now but 100 metres was still no problem for me.

Just running 100 metres that is. My speed was another matter, I soon realised. Oh dear...

Still, now that I was registered for it I could only give my all!

During my practice sprints, sometimes I ended up with Wakaba-chan once in a while. I guess she signed up for it too.

Today, Wakaba-chan and I were lined up at the start line. I overheard a girl from her

class whisper,

“You get it, right...?”

Hm?

Throughout the sprint, Wakaba-chan was making good time. But then just before we reached the finish line, she began to slow. Eh!? What the heck was this!?

“You were so fast, Reika-sama!” the people around me praised when I passed the goal, but just now that match was totally fixed, wasn’t it...

What the heck! What happened to sportsmanship!? I wouldn’t be happy even if I won like this!

Wakaba-chan’s expression didn’t betray a thing. She didn’t look like she minded at all. But I minded. It was match fixing. I could let it slide this time since we were just practising, but it would be a huge issue if we did this on the day.

I called out to her without hesitation.

“Excuse me, Takamichi-san.”

“Yes?” she asked in surprise.

“You lost on purpose just now.”

“Eh? I, uhhh...”

I could see her looking at our spectators, unsure of what to do. It was obvious that everybody was watching us, my followers included.

“Winning because somebody handed me the victory does not make me happy in the slightest. Stop trying to accommodate me and just run as fast as you can. If I lose to you then that is simply proof that I am lacking.”

“Aahh... All right.”

Ruining the race with match fixing would just spoil everybody’s fun. It would spoil my fun too. Plus, if that Athletics Carnival maniac found out about it he would be angry

for sure.

I think everybody cooperated because I lost pretty much every time after that.

The group I was assigned to for the real sprint was filled with girls even slower than I was. They really were accomodating me...

Each night I worked on Bea-tan's parts while I fought to stay awake. The Kaburagi family invited me to a moon-viewing party but I of course declined. As If I had time for that. Moon-viewing parties were just eating parties for me anyway. I made sure to eat a lot at home.

Since it was a waste not to celebrate though, I decorated my room with susuki pampas grass and watched the moon on my own with salted bean daifuku to eat.



Sometimes I shocked myself with how refined I was.

Since tomorrow was a weekend I stayed up extra late to get more needle felting done.

Lately I had been shutting myself in my room the moment I got home. I guess Otousama finally got curious because he came to my room to check up on me.

"Otousama has been worried about you, Reika," he said, "Lately you haven't been leaving your room except to eat."

“I apologise for that. However, I am quite busy preparing for the school festival,” I replied without stopping my hands.

I have no idea what he was thinking but he began talking about helping me out. Maybe he was trying to bond with me or something. Apparently he thought he could do it too after just watching me a few times.

“What do we have here. Otousama will do the torso,” he said.

“Do you know how, Otousama?”

“What do you mean ‘do I know’. It’s easy. Leave it to Otousama.”

But despite talking big the Tanuki was unbelievably bad!

“Otousama! You have broken off part of the needle inside! Aah! The torso is all flattened now!”

“Ohh! Sorry! Don’t worry though, if I do *this*...”

“Noooo! Just stop touching it! This part is dented now! Waaaah!”

Don’t joke with me, Tanuki! The torso was half-done already and you ruined it! God, what the hell! What the hell was this!

“Get out!” I screamed on the verge of tears.

God, I quit! I was going to sleep!

“Otousama was wrong. Forgive me, Reika,” I heard from beyond the door, but it was no concern of mine! This tanuki could just go repent by cutting down the katsura tree on the moon!

I was laying in bed with my pillow over my face. It was impossible for me to make it on time now! God, I was just sick of everything!

The next morning, Otousama’s secretary Sasajima-san came to visit.

“Reika-ojousama, apparently something happened...?”

Since Oniisama was on a business trip and apparently Otousama couldn't wipe his own butt, he even went and called Sasajima-san here on a day off. What the hell was this tanuki doing!

“Sorry for wasting your weekend, Sasajima-san.”

“Please do not mind it. Do you think you could show me the handicrafts project you were working on?”

I said that it was fine again and again but he insisted, so I reluctantly brought the parts to the living room.

“I see...”

Sasajima-san began examining the torso from multiple angles.

“I'll be borrowing this for a moment,” said Sasajima-san before using the needle to pull on the wool in the dented parts. Ehhh!?

Before long, Sasajima-san had skilfully restored the parts that Otousama ruined, and after some consultation of the design sheet, even finished the torso entirely.

“You're amazing!”

“I am honoured.”

That was a capable secretary for you! To think that even handicrafts was child's play!

All that was left were the head and legs. And the legs were almost done. Didn't that mean I would make it on time!?

“Thank you so much, Sasajima-san!”

“It was no problem at all. Ojousama, do you think you could make up with your father now?”

“...Yes.”

In consideration to Sasajima-san who had given up his day with his family for this, I decided to forgive Otousama. I still had to thank him as well though. We had received a lot of dried fish as mid-year gifts, so I offered him as much as he wanted. Oh! Otousama had some good alcohol too, didn't he? Here, take some! Oh, and some of Okaasama's super high class bathing powders from France. I really recommend them, they'll help keep you moisturised in the coming season. Oh, and sweets! Take some sweets too.

"And Sasajima-san, please do not forget to claim weekend penalty pay as well, all right?"

"You say some surprisingly working class things, don't you, Ojousama..."

With gifts in both hands, Sasajima-san was seen off by Otousama and I.

"Otousama, please *do not* trouble your secretary with every little thing."

"Got it..."

"And besides the weekend rates, make sure to give him a bonus too."

"Got it..."

"Naturally all of this will be coming out of your own pocket, Otousama."

"Got it..."



## CHAPTER 148

---

While many of the girls at Suiran were using the same towels as Enjou and Kaburagi, a select few of them secretly used towels that matched their crushes instead. Some girls even gave matching towels to their boyfriends to deepen their love. Suiran was undergoing an unprecedented towel boom.

And shockingly, Class Rep's quartet were all using the same towels!

"Oh, we just got these to commemorate our friendship, that's all. It isn't what you're thinking, Kisshouin-san~" he said shyly.

That was his reply when I went to question him about it. Friendship huh. In that case, why wasn't I invited.

Wasn't I in on the whole 'make-up Iwamuro-kun' thing? Actually, wasn't I the one that started it? And yet here I was... Ah well, I wasn't going to get into it. And it was fine, right?. They were having fun.

And sure, there definitely were a few girls who used matching 'friendship towels'. Honestly I was envious.

The rumours regarding my towel matching Enjou's had finally cooled down. I wasn't about to use them at school and risk starting the flames again. My friends on the other hand were naturally happily using the same towels as the Emperor and Enjou so I was the only one amongst them feeling left out with my normal towel. Tsk~ Invite me too, Class Rep~

One day Ririna came up to me and threw a towel at my face.

"Use this!"

Ow.

When I picked it off my face I discovered that it was a cream-coloured towel with the letters R. K. sewn on in red. Ririna, you...

I gratefully made use of it. That girl had a surprisingly cute side to her. Did she sew in

my initials herself? Mn, you did very well, huhu.

After my sprint training I was sorting through my bag in the Handicrafts Club when Minami-kun saw the towel in my hand.

“Ah! The towel that I embroidered to give to Kotou-san...” he muttered.

I immediately ran to Ririna and used the towel to strangle the outrageous girl.

Ririnaaaaa! *You're unbelievableeee!* Give me back my fuzzy feelings!

More important was Wakaba-chan. Kaburagi casually called out to her every time they met. Sometimes you could see her, Kaburagi, and Enjou standing around and talking together. Enjou might have been one thing but it was rare to see Kaburagi use any girl's name. For every ‘Takamichi’ that came out of his mouth, his fans glared hatefully at her.

Thanks to him, Wakaba-chan came back soaked whenever she went to the taps, and it was common to see girls badmouthing her like she wasn't right next to them.

One day I was heading to the taps, having just finished my practice for the three-legged race.

“What does she think she's using? That towel looks like a dish rag.”

“Can she really help it? She has no money.”

“If I had something like that at my house the only use it would have is cleaning the floors.”

“Gosh. Doesn't that mean that dust cloths are good enough for a certain somebody?”

A group of girls were sneering behind her while saying hurtful things. Wakaba-chan just pretended not to hear them and washed her face dispassionately.

The girls seemed to take offence to that because Tsuruhana-san's Number 2 bumped

into her on purpose and even tossed Wakaba-chan's towel onto the ground.

"Goodness! Myy baaad~"

Without missing a beat, the girl used her other hand to splash water onto Wakaba-chan whose face and fringe ended up dripping wet. She didn't have her towel to dry herself with anymore. It was lying on the ground and there were even footprints on it.

Should I go save her...?

"Let's go, Reika-sama," said Ru'ne-chan without much interest. Mm, but...

At that moment a group of boys just happened to be coming back from their own training. Those girls noticed too and quickly distanced themselves from Wakaba-chan.

In the centre of the group was Kaburagi who raised an eyebrow at Wakaba-chan. She was standing there soaked and trying to dry her face with her hands of all things.

"What the heck are you doing. Don't you have a towel?"

"Ummm... I kind of dropped it..."

"What are you even doing, you idiot. Here, use this," he said before tossing over his own towel.

I could see the instant the expressions on the other girls changed.

"Eh!? It's fine. You don't need to!" she said, trying to hand it back in a panic. Wakaba-chan had sensed it too.

Kaburagi hadn't noticed at all though.

"Just take it. And you can keep it. Don't worry about giving it back."

He refused her with one hand and simply headed into the school building with Enjou and the others.

Left behind, Wakaba-chan picked up her own towel and threw out an excuse.

"Um, I'll give it back to him..." she said, before running off behind him.

Tsuruhana-san and her friends were furious.

“What the hell was that!?”

Kaburagi... Seriously, what the heck was that?

There was a lot of trouble in my life recently.

Compared to the the storm of rumours that Kaburagi’s towel had caused, the towel incident with Enjou and I was nothing.

And each day it was jealousy-fuelled open season for Wakaba-chan in my group. I tried to stop them a few times but it didn’t go well.

It was hard just staying silent while I saw Wakaba-chan being bullied. Even though I wanted to do something, I couldn’t. I was pathetic...

And whenever I went to the Pivoine Salon, the President was always in a bad mood because of how active a leader Fellow Stalking Horse had been since becoming the Student Council President.

“This new Student Council sure are an insolent bunch...”

“The other day that Mizusaki guy was even running off his mouth about us. He really doesn’t know his place.”

“The lot of them are behaving as though they own the place after misunderstanding their own positions.”

“President, what should we do?”

The Pivoine elitists were gathered around the President and discussing how we were going to treat the Student Council from now on.

“For now we will wait and see what they do. If they disrespect the Pivoine any further we will not lie still.”

Scary... I didn't know what to do about the Pivoine either.

And with the needle felting for the Bea-tan doll face not going well, or how my love at the library was not progressing at all, I just had a lot of worries these days.

To help change gears a little I decided to go for a walk on the weekend.

I got off at a train station far away from home and was just strolling about when I caught scent of something delicious. *Gasp!* I knew this smell!



*A temple festival in Tokyo*

Following the smell, my nose led me to a temple fair stall with ikayaki.



*Ikayaki, or grilled squid, is a fast food favourite, often served as just a sauced up tentacle at temple fairs.*

I knew it!

I bought one and bit into it on the spot. *Yummy!* It was my first time having festival ikayaki since becoming Kisshouin Reika! Sooo yummmmy!

I couldn't get enough of this cheap flavour! Maybe it would be better to eat some takoyaki as well. But first things first, there was this ikayaki to finish off! Aahh, why did eating yummy things just melt the stress away?

Thinking back, I used to eat these a lot in my old life, back when I visited festivals. I used to go with my little sister Yuka-chan, and my cousin Naru-kun. And I used to buy fairy floss at these things too. And candied apples, and yakisoba too! We'd buy all sorts of food and share it between us. I missed that. Dad liked ikayaki the best, didn't he.

It had been so long that the ikayaki had sent me into my own world. I had totally lost myself in it and completely left my guard down.

"Eh-, Kisshouin-san...!?"

The blood drained from my face at the voice.

## CHAPTER 149

---

There I was, in the middle of biting into it. There Wakaba-chan was, staring at me in shock.

“Ummmmm...”

She was the first one to say anything, but she was obviously at a loss for words.

I was in a worse state, having fallen into complete panic in my mind. My heart was beating uncontrollably.

What was I going to do. Why. I had always been so careful not to let anybody I knew spot me.

Why had I assumed it was impossible for any Suiran student to be at this tiny festival. Any other time I would have taken care to eat it somewhere nobody would see me.

I had been stupid beyond words. What was I going to do. Somebody from Suiran had seen me!

“Ummm.... What a coincidence?” she said a little awkwardly.

“...Indeed ...it is.”

An ojousama frozen in the middle of biting into ikayaki? I must have looked so unbelievably stupid! Aaaahh! Why did you lose to your gluttony, Reika! You were too caught up in nostalgia, you idiot!

One by one, I could see the faces of the students at Suiran. Serika-chan, Kikuno-chan, Ayame-chan, Ru’ne-chan... All the members of the Pivoine. The President. Ahh! If Youko-sama found out about this I was done for! The *shame* of the Pivoine! Images of an enraged Youko-sama flashed before my eyes...

“Umm, are you okay?” she hesitantly called out while I was drowning in negativity. Oh right! I had to silence her!

“*Takamichi-san!*”

“Yes!?”

Wakaba-chan immediately stood at attention.

“Could you, perhaps, keep quiet about this...?”

“By ‘this’ you mean what happened today?”

Yeah, that we met today, or rather about how you caught me biting into stick of ikayaki...

“Ummm... Just, everything in general...”

“...Mmm, I don’t really understand but... okay. Got it. I won’t tell a soul about what happened today!”

“Eh-, truly!?”

Really!? She really wouldn’t tell anyone!?

“Yeah! It’s a promise!” she nodded firmly.

“Thank you! It’s really a promise, okay? I’m believing in you!” I stepped forward towards her.

“Y-Yeah,” she back-pedalled in the face of my intensity.

Still, she gave me another nod.

Alright! If she was anything like the manga’s Wakaba-chan then I really could trust her! Definitely! Probably! Or more like I’d *have* to trust her if I ever wanted a good night’s sleep again.

“Well then, please excuse me,” I said.

For now I just wanted to get away. I was keenly aware that she was not going to forget the sight of the ojousama fleeing with the half-eaten ikayaki in her hand. I was more than ready to forget about reality.

After forcing myself to smile at her, I was about to leave when she stopped me.



“Wait, Kisshouin-san. Are you going to go home looking like that?”

“Eh?”

Looking like what?

“Uwah!”

The sauce from the ikayaki was all over the breast of my white dress! Gyaah! And there were even specks of it on the skirt!?

“Nooo, what *is* this! Aahh! What am I going to do!?”

I hurriedly took out a handkerchief from my bag but it was hopeless. Maybe I could soak it in water. Or better yet, buy some bleach... God, I had some on my hands too! And everything was made even harder because I was still holding the damned ikayaki. Aah, I wanted to cry...

“...Um, Kisshouin-san. How about you come to my house? I think we can get rid of the stains if we’re quick...”

Eh-!? Wakaba-chan’s house!? Ah, no, that couldn’t be a good idea, could it?

“No, it is no problem, thank you. I will take a taxi home,” I turned her down with a veneer of fake calm.

But I’d be in trouble if I came home looking like this. Okaasama and the rest of my family would find out about my gluttony today...

“It doesn’t look like no problem to me... It’ll be really quick, so how about we just give it a wash and then you can go home. Okay?”

“But-”

“We can still get the stains out if we go now. Okay?”

Under Wakaba-chan’s strong persuasion I ended up going after all. How did this happen... So much had happened that I just didn’t want to think about it anymore...

Apparently Wakaba-chan had been on the way home from somewhere and just

happened to pass through there. Some girl in a white dress had been looking like the very picture of a rich girl, so naturally it caught her eye. And that girl had turned out to be me...

“Was I very noticeable...?”

“You could say that~”

Holy crap... Don't tell me that other people had noticed me too? I thought my clothes were pretty casual for a dress.

Wakaba-chan was kind enough to walk in front of me, in order to hide the stains. I was still quietly wondering what to do with this ikayaki in my hand.

After walking for a little while longer, Wakaba-chan turned her head to me.

“We're here~”

Her house was your everyday cake shop.

Not the fancy pâtisseries that the kids of Suiran frequented. Just your normal, average cake shop. With things like strawberry shortcakes, chocolate cakes, mont blancs and the like at 200~300 yen each and even cream puffs for 150 yen it was the very picture of a cake shop for commoners.

The only difference was that the taste of the cakes was a well-known 10/10.

When I read the Kimidol manga I often wanted to try the cakes from this cake shop. They were just drawn so beautifully after all. And right now that cake store of my dreams was right before my eyes!

“The entrance is at the back.”

I circled around the back with her and she opened the door to let me in. I was idling while she was busy with that and happened to look to the side. Sitting there was a bicycle with the front half completely bent out of shape.

Huh? Wasn't this the bicycle that Wakaba-chan rode to school that one time? Ehh...? What the heck happened to it!? Was she okay!?

Wakaba-chan noticed what I was looking at and smiled.

“Ah, that,” she laughed, “During the summer break Kaburagi-sama’s car bumped into me and it broke, haha.”

*“Eeehh!?”*

She got hit by Kaburagi’s car!?

“Bumped...? Were you okay!? Were you injured!?”

“I was fine~ I was trying to pull over to the curb when the car hit from the side. It sent me flying away with my bike but I jumped off so I got away with just some bruises and scrapes.”

“That sounds like a huge deal to me.”

I mean, just look at the shape the bicycle was in...

Wakaba-chan just laughed and welcomed me in.

“Please excuse the intrusion...”

“Yes, yes, come in~ I suppose getting out of those clothes should come first, huh. I’ll go grab a change of clothes, so could you head to the laundry room to change first? Ah, what are you going to do with that?”

Wakaba-chan pointed at the ikayaki in my hand. What indeed.

“Well, for now I’ll just hold onto it for you. You can wash your hands over here. Ummm, right, clothes, clothes...”

Wakaba-chan ran off further into the house with my half-eaten ikayaki and came right back with clothes for me.

“Just tell me when you’re done changing. I’ll give your clothes a wash when you’re done.”

“Thank you.”

I accepted the clothes with a bow, but at that very instant my stomach growled!

“...”

Just let me disappear already.

“It’s already 3 isn’t it. Have you eaten lunch yet? I could make you some yakisoba or something?”

“No! You have been so much help already!”

“I haven’t had lunch either so why don’t you eat with me while we wait for your clothes? Oh, I suppose you don’t eat stuff like yakisoba, huh...”

“No, I do!”

I loved that stuff. I had actually planned on eating some after I finished with that ikayaki.

“I’ll go make some then! What were you going to do with that ikayaki? What if I cut it up and put it in?”

“Please take care of it...”

“Got it~” she smiled brightly before closing the door to the laundry room.

I changed into the T-shirt and elastic waist shorts.

It was funny.

I was here in the house of Kimidol’s protagonist. It somehow didn’t feel real. My knowledge of her was one-sided and before today we had hardly exchanged a word.

“Doesn’t suit me...” I muttered as I looked in the mirror.

The horrible combination of the T-shirt, shorts, and ringlets just depressed me.

When I left the room and called out hesitantly, Wakaba-chan came running.

“I’ll take care of those stains then.”

“Eh-, are you using the washing machine for just one piece of clothing!? Think of the electricity and water bills!”

It was so wasteful! And I felt really bad for imposing too! Just running the stains under the tap would do!

“Electricity? Ummm, the sauce is pretty much everywhere though, so I thought washing the whole thing would be better. Would that damage the dress though?”

“I honestly do not care about that...”

“Then I’ll just stick it in the wash. Don’t worry! I’ll use the dryer too!”

With practised hands, Wakaba-chan sprinkled stain remover on the stains before putting the dress in a net and starting up the washing machine.

“Let’s eat while we wait.”

“I truly am sorry for causing you trouble...”

“Ahaha, it’s fine, it’s fine~”

I followed her into the dining room and then was treated to Wakaba-chan’s homemade yakisoba.

“Sorry for not having anything better. I’m not sure that it’ll suit the tastes of an ojousama like you.”

“Goodness, that isn’t true! I shall be helping myself then.”

“Eat up.”

I could see the sliced up ikayaki in it. Thank you, Wakaba-chan.

I took a bite of the food. Oh, this taste!

“Is it okay? Think you can eat it...?”

“It is delicious,” I answered her as I gobbled it down.

The taste reminded me of the cheap 3-pack yakisoba that I often bought in my old life. So nostalgic.

This would definitely never appear on the Kisshouin dinner table. Even if we did have yakisoba by some chance, it would definitely be some sort of refined dish from a high class Chinese restaurant. God, I loved this sauce so much!

In the blink of an eye it was gone. Hahh, thanks for the meal. Afterwards I gulped down the barley tea that Wakaba-chan gave me. So nostalgic...

“It seems you ended up taking care of me from start to finish...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Wakaba-chan cheerfully sipped her own barley tea.

For a while we were silent.

“Um, Takamichi-san...”

“Yes?”

I voiced the thought that had been bothering me all this time.

“Um, how... do you think of school?”

It might have been a weird way of putting it, but I couldn’t exactly say ‘Are you being bullied?’ now could I.

“How? Um, what do you mean?”

Yep. It really was a vague question.”

“Ummm... I suppose that I am asking what you think of your life at Suiran.”

“It’s pretty great I guess?”

“Eh-, really!?”

I mean, don’t you get badmouthed and tripped and soaked with water every day!?

Was she just answering that way to avoid worrying me? She wasn't just acting tough was she?

"Yes. I'm really lucky to have gotten into Suiran."

"Lucky..."

I had thought for a moment that she might have been making a jab at me, but Wakaba-chan smiled without any deeper meaning.

"Isn't it though? I get to use those amazing facilities and take high-level lessons, all for free, right? Not only that but to even get paid scholarship money for getting high marks... Uku-"

Wakaba-chan's mouth curved into a grin.

"For the mock-trials the other day, I got the best results I ever had. Just between you and me, the bonus money that they gave me for that..."

Wakaba-chan brought her hand to her mouth to stifle the laughter. ...Apparently it was quite a lot.

"A school that *pays* you money just for studying. It's the best school *ever*."

I honestly thought it was the worst school ever for buying good grades with money, but whatever.

"I mean, even I think it's impossible to hit the digits that I want before graduation, but if I tried hard enough, maybe half of it would be... Ukukukukuku!"

Wakaba-chan couldn't control herself anymore and began laughing uproariously.

Digits!? How many digits did she mean?! Just how much money was Suiran paying scholarship students?

"Umm, but... are there not other matters...? For example, the badmouthing..." I asked awkwardly.

"Oh, I don't really mind it," she answered without missing a beat.

“Eh-, you do not really mind it?”

“Yes. I mean, it’s nothing physical, right?”

Um, but it totally was. Like they physically splashed water onto her and hit her with balls and stuff.

“Does it not hurt? Being treated that way...”

“Hmmm...”

It was only now that Wakaba-chan looked like she needed to think about it.

Wakaba-chan was even bolder, and even more shameless than I could have ever imagined—

“Then, just one more question. About being hit by Kaburagi-sama...”

I finally asked what I had been wondering since I got here.



## CHAPTER 150

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*The legend of the “Straw Millionaire” is a Japanese Buddhist folk tale about a poor man who becomes wealthy through a series of successive trades, starting with a single piece of straw.*

*A hard-working but unlucky peasant named Daietsu-no-suke prays to Kannon, the goddess of mercy, to help him escape poverty. Kannon tells him to take the first thing he touches on the ground with him and travel west. He stumbles on his way out of the temple and grabs a piece of straw. While travelling, he catches a horsefly that was bothering him and ties it to the straw. In the next town, the buzzing horsefly calms a crying baby and the thankful mother exchanges it for three oranges. Taking the oranges, he continues on his journey and encounters a dehydrated woman. He gives her the oranges and she thanks him by giving him a rich silk cloth. The peasant meets a samurai with a weak horse. The samurai demands the silk cloth in exchange for his horse. The peasant nurses the horse back to health and continues west. A millionaire is impressed by his horse and invites him to his home. The millionaire’s daughter turns out to be the same woman he saved with his oranges. Seeing this as a sign, the millionaire insists that the peasant marry his daughter, making him a millionaire.*

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She might have casually deflected the question earlier but I couldn’t ignore that she had been hit by a car.

“Kaburagi-sama ran you over with his car over the summer?”

“Ahaha, I guess.”

Oh my god. The reason the two of them suddenly seemed so close after the summer break was because he sent her flying with his car!?

“It really wasn’t as bad as it sounds. And the car wasn’t going all that fast either. Anyway, it sort of hit me and then I got bowled over and went rolling, like this,” she said, first posing like a frog and then rolling like a ball.

“Anyhow, I jumped right off so I wasn’t really injured, okay? I suppose since they actually ran over the front of the bike a little it might have been worse had I still been holding on though~ Ahaha.”

Not just hit by a car, but then literally run over? That's not something to be laughing about, Wakaba-chan.

"I presume that Kaburagi-sama took the appropriate measures, then?" I asked, "It did not, heavens forbid, turn into some hit-and-run incident...?"

"God, nooo~ He apologised and everything, and even though I said I was fine he took me to the hospital too."

"Obviously."

"But I didn't hit my head or my back so rather than being hit by a car, it's better to say that it just kind of knocked me over. I mean, I was wearing summer clothes so the asphalt grazed my arms and hands a bit but that was it~ Well, that and the bruises hurt for a few days I guess."

The whole time she was speaking, Wakaba-chan was wearing a carefree smile.

"But you *did* get injured," I stressed, "And even if you got off lightly, you saw what happened to your bicycle. You *did* press him for reparations?"

"Ehh~?! Reparations? No way."

"What are you saying! How can you give up like that! You must squeeze him for everything he has!"

"‘Squeeze’..."

Wakaba-chan looked a little disturbed at my suggestion, but Kaburagi was rich. If he just settled out of court with her he was hardly going to miss the money!

"But actually, you know, he did offer me reparations money. And his lawyer came over to my house a number of times too. It was really exciting actually, meeting my first lawyer! He seemed really capable too! As expected of the Kaburagi family's legal advisor! Ah, but I suppose you don't really care about that, huh. Ummm, anyway, we refused. I mean, I didn't really get hurt or anything, you know? But then he kept offering money as a 'get well gift' and in the end we didn't manage to refuse that too. It was less than the reparations offer but it was still a lot of money, you know! Actually, the number for the reparations was so huge that when we heard it my whole family started trembling."

“My...”

“The ‘get well gift’ he wouldn’t budge on at all, so in the end he handed over this huge ‘get well soon’ envelope,” she gestured with her fingers.

From the space between her finger and her thumb there had to have been half a million *at least*.

“What really surprised me was that the envelope had his family crest on it. I guess big families even have their envelopes custom made, huh~ Could it be that the Kisshouin family does that too?”

“Well, yes.”

“I see~ That’s *amazing*~”

Wakaba-chan, it’s really not the time to be focusing on that.

“Oh! And you know? He got me back for the bike too. I was so surprised when I found out it was some super expensive Italian bike!”

“My.”

“Somehow my 10,000 yen bike turned into a something a few dozen times more expensive. Isn’t it a bit like the story of the Straw Millionaire?”

Um, not quite...

“I was actually worried somebody would steal it, you know, it was so expensive. It’s actually still sitting in my garden. The wire lock I’m using to keep it safe even has a bell!”

“I see.”

“You know, my old bicycle had a traffic safety sticker on it and when I was hit by the car I was totally fine. I’m starting to think of it as a lucky sticker. That’s why I tried to put it on the my new one too, but Kaburagi-sama begged me not to and said that it would be blasphemy against the bike. Oh, and since the bike is customisable I said I wanted to get a basket and luggage rack but then he started talking about the design of the bike and stuff~”

Yeah, I suppose Kaburagi's sense of aesthetics wouldn't allow that.

Wakaba-chan said that the washing machine seemed to have stopped, so she left for a bit and came back with my dress on a coat hanger.

"It all came off~ I put on the dryer for a bit so if we hang it outside it'll dry right up~"

"Thank you for this."

We left my white dress fluttering outside to dry. The weather was still warm so Wakaba-chan was probably right.

Just then, a woman who I assumed to be her mum walked in.

"Wakaba, has one of your friends come over?"

"Oh, Mum. Ummmm, I guess...? This is Kisshouin-san. She's in my grade at Suiran."

"Pleased to meet you. I apologise for suddenly intruding. I am Kisshouin Reika, and I have the pleasure of being in the same grade as Takamichi-san at Suiran."

"Goodness! I can't even see you as her friend, you're so refined~! Really, as expected of Suiran!"

"Mum!"

Wakaba-chan's mum was cheerful and kind, and somehow brought to mind my own mum in my old life.

"Mum, is it really okay to leave the shop alone?"

"I just wanted to have a little look. And Wakaba, since your friend came over did you treat her to any cake?"

"Look, I've got it, okay? Kisshouin-san, would you like some cake?"

"Eh!?"

Cake made by Wakaba-chan's family! I had already decided that I had to buy some before I came home, but I was going to be able to eat it *now*!?

“...Would that be all right?”

“It’s nothing like the cakes I’m sure you’re used to eating, so you really don’t have to if you don’t want to. It really is just cake for ordinary people.”

“No, I would love to try some!”

“Well okay. Help yourself then.”

And that was how the two of us went into the front of the building to look at the cakes.

“Waah!”

Cake from the Takamichi cake shop! They were simple and mainstream, but they all looked delicious! Which one would I choose?

“Decided?”

“Um, perhaps this mont blanc...”

“Okaay! Maybe I’ll have one too then. Mum, two mont blancs please~”

“Ah-! I can pay!”

“Nah, don’t worry about that.”

“I must! These are your store’s stock!”

“Ahaha, it’s fine I said.”

Ehhhhh. This wasn’t right. I was being beyond shameless now!

In the end Wakaba-chan kept refusing me with a smile so the two of us returned to the living room with our cakes.

“Sorry. Thank you. I shall help myself to some now.”

“You don’t have to keep thanking us for something as small as this. Go ahead. Ah, but I’m not sure it’ll suit your tastes though...”

I carried the bit of mont blanc on my fork into my mouth.

*"Yummy!"*

"Really!? That's great!"

The cake that I had dreamed about eating, ever since reading Kimidol... It was a sweet, light, and gentle flavour.

"Yes, it is simply delicious. I will buy some to bring home with me, without a doubt."

"Thank goodness~ We're just a small shop but lately people have been blogging about it on the internet and stuff and apparently some people even come from far away to buy from here, you know?" she told me happily before starting on her own mont blanc.

"I can certainly understand travelling for a cake like this. There were a few customers in the store too, just now."

"Ehehe, thanks."

Oniisama would be coming back from his long business trip today. I was definitely going to bring some cake home. I bet he was going to love it. Huhu! Aah, so yummy.

"Speaking of cake though, remember how I said I turned down the reparations money?"

"Yes."

"Since I said I wouldn't accept it no matter what, he replied that he would buy all of the cakes in the store instead."

"Haah!?"

What the hell was that guy doing!

"I told him that his feelings were enough and refused. Boy was I not expecting that."

"What a nuisance..."

There were people who were coming all the way here to buy these cakes. Just how

much of a nuisance would it be if one idiot went and bought them all.

“There was a lot of back and forth between us and in the end he compromised by taking one of every cake.”

“I see... Things have been rough on you.”

Honestly, what was that guy thinking.

“Anyway, we decided not to tell anybody at Suiran about this whole thing. It wouldn’t sound good for his reputation right? That his car hit somebody, I mean.”

“Indeed.”

She might have escaped with just some bruising but that was still absolutely being hit with a car. No wonder neither of them would tell us how they had gotten closer.

“But in that case, is it all right to be telling me all of this?” I asked.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s just going to stay between the two of us, right? We’re not telling anybody about today, after all,” she grinned.

Oh. Right. The ikayaki incident. Could it be that she told me all this because she didn’t want me to worry about my own secret?

“I understand. I will not tell a soul!”

“Yeah. I won’t either. It’s a promise.”

When the evening arrived, Wakaba-chan’s younger siblings came home. My dress was dry by then as well, so I got changed and excused myself.

“You may as well have stayed for dinner,” her mum said.

“Thank you very much for the offer,” I replied, “But I have a curfew, you see...”

I was happy that she offered but I hadn’t said anything to my family. It wouldn’t have been good to stay out too late.

With my objective (the cake) secured, I bade everybody in the Takamichi family

goodbye before leaving for home.

Now then, I had to *casually* drop Oniisama the news that I had become President of the Handicrafts Club.



## CHAPTER 151

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I owed Wakaba-chan a lot now. I wanted to thank her somehow but couldn't think of any good gift ideas.

Normally I'd be gifting something from the stores that my family were in with. Fruits from an expensive fruit store, or cookies from an exclusive confectionary that you needed connections to buy from. But it would be a bit rude to give cakes and stuff to a family of bakers, huh~ And it felt a bit like flaunting my money. Hmmmm...

After a lot of deliberation I ended up gifting her family some black tea and coffee that would go well with cakes. As for Wakaba-chan herself, I gave her some stationery with Suiran's crest on it. Notepads and other consumables. After all, gifts that you could use up felt a lot less serious than durable gifts, didn't they!

Since we were keeping that day between us, we still never really talked at school. After a while I started to wonder if I really had gone to her house. It couldn't have been a daydream or something? I really did go, right?

There was only a little time left until the Athletics Carnival so every class was practising harder than ever. Everybody in my class was aiming for high scores as well, but I wonder how we would really go~

Everybody seemed to laugh as they trained, so it felt like we weren't being serious enough. The boys were training for the cavalry battle too, by the way. I wonder if it was because of experience that running away from the start was a valid strategy to them. But considering the competition this year, wouldn't they have a fair chance of winning as long as they tried harder?

Emperor was still sticking to his retirement.

According to the girls in his class a lot of people had asked him to participate but the Emperor had silenced them all with a wave of his hand.

He had retired, and there was no two ways about that.

Some people insisted anyhow, so the Emperor said this:

‘I’m retired so I won’t participating. But I’ll be happy to train you.’

Mmn. Thank goodness I wasn’t in his class. And more importantly, thank goodness I wasn’t born as a guy. Watching those poor boys train under him was like watching drills performed by the Spartan army... And it was scary the way their eyes shone.

One day, the Pivoine’s President butted heads with Fellow Stalking Horse.

Apparently it had all started when some Pivoine members demanded a couple of students yield some seats with a good view to them. Worse yet, those Pivoine members were only first years whilst the students sitting there were in Third Year. Fellow Stalking Horse had been of the opinion that the Pivoine kids should have respected their upperclassmen.

The President and her Pivoine supremacists on the other hand had taken exception to that. They came in and demanded to know who dared to question the Pivoine.

Right now, the air in the cafeteria was like a powder keg.

“To begin with, demanding that somebody give up a seat when they got there first is nothing short of tyranny. As if that wasn’t enough, they were upperclassmen as well. That would offend anyone’s sensibilities.”

“Upperclassmen or not, they were Pivoine. This is Suiran, Common sense dictates that being a Pivoine takes precedence above all else. It matters not who they are. And even by your own admission, upperclassmen should be respected.. Are you not violating decorum right this moment by arguing with me?”

“I’m the Student Coucil President. Protecting the students is the duty of the Student Council. You’re mistaken if you think the Pivoine can do whatever they want. You already have seats reserved for yourselves. And there were plenty of empty seats. But instead they decided that they wanted *that* seat and forced the person sitting there to vacate it. Don’t you think that’s being a little too outrageous? The Student Council won’t overlook selfish behaviour like that.”

“Outrageous!? Who do you think you are! How dare you speak to us like that!”

Anger crossed her beautiful features. But Fellow Stalking Horse was unperturbed.

“A member of the Pivoine is a student like any other. If they have done something wrong then I believe it falls to the Student Council to warn them.”

“Enough, you hateful upstart!”

Upstart!?

“At the end of the day is your “Student Council” anything more than a collection of upstarts? The *only* reason you’ve been able to throw around the words ‘Student Council’ to have your way around here is because we have kindly allowed you to. For you to misunderstand, and even defy the Pivoine... Know some shame! The Pivoine is the symbol of Suiran! Comparing our positions with a gathering of glorified commoners like your Student Council is like comparing heaven and earth!”

“...!”

The President’s excessive words caused anger to flash across his face.

That was when the teachers rushed in to stop them in a panic. Fellow Stalking Horse allowed himself to be led away, whilst the other Student Council members followed behind in worry. The President and her supporters watched their retreating figures with baleful gazes.

I was frightened so I had hid amongst Serika-chan and the others early on. All I had done was watch how things developed but my stomach was still hurting and I had lost all appetite.

“This has turned into a huge deal, hasn’t it...”

“Mizusaki-kun should have just picked his words a little better. I hope he’s okay...”

As I considered my position as a Pivoine member, my hands couldn’t help but shake in the face of the inevitable conflict to come.

Scary... I wish I had a tougher heart. I might have looked like a Rococo Queen on the outside, but inside I was just a petty bourgeois.

Where had Kaburagi and Enjou been for all this?

I looked around and realised that Kaburagi had been sitting at the reserved seats, right in the middle of the fiasco. He had a fed-up look on his face.

When he noticed Wakaba-chan following after Fellow Stalking Horse in worry, he stared at her until she was gone.

The Principal personally cautioned Fellow Stalking Horse. Naturally he said nothing to the Pivoine.

I personally thought it was ridiculous too, but this was Suiran after all. Fellow Stalking Horse must have been incredibly frustrated, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Since the school administration had given the Student Council a warning over their attitude towards the Pivoine, the incident with the seats was tentatively settled. I could only pray that no further troubles arose though.

The day of the Athletics Carnival came.

Emperor and his Spartan Army were taking heads from the get-go. I could only imagine the hell they had gone through in training. Their enthusiasm was on another level. It didn't even feel like an athletics carnival to them.

Well, the girls in their class were just cheering and squealing without a care in the world though.

Fellow Stalking Horse was doing just as well. Yep, yep. Exercise was the best for releasing your stress, wasn't it. Do your best, Fellow Stalking Horse.

Before long it was time for my 100 metre sprint.

When I arrived at the gathering point, Wakaba-chan looked me in the eye and pumped her fist.

"I'm going to give it my all!"

Ahaha! Somebody was enthused. Wakaba-chan, we're not even in the same group.

I smiled and was about to reply when some of my participating group members moved between us.

"Who are you acting so familiar with! Do you know who this person is!?"

They glared at her and pulled me away.

"Come, Reika-sama. That girl really needs to learn her place!"

And you even went out of your way to talk to me. I'm sorry, Wakaba-chan...

Still, I mean, it was a bit weird saying this about myself, but Wakaba-chan sure was fearless to talk that way to Kisshouin Reika of the Pivoine...

Considering they were basically there to give me a good experience, naturally I came first in my group.

"You were magnificent, Reika-sama!" clamoured my followers as they added to the experience with clapping.

Could it have gotten any more fixed. I wanted to bury myself in a hole...

Wakaba-chan only made 2nd place, unfortunately. She seemed to have fun though.

There was still a lot of the day to go.



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